



大漠谣

Ballad of the Desert

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Chapter 17: Kidnapping

A pitch black sky blankets the earth, on the wide road there is just the sound of horse hooves reverberating. I sit in the carriage and stare towards the East, where the grand city of Chang An is becoming farther and farther from me. Some time later, the sun rises over the East, just a few slivers, but it's already brilliant, shining life on the horizon.

Slowly, in the clouds dotting the sky, a fiery explosion happens. A red round sun bursts from the flames and rises. In moments it has surrounded the vista and eliminated the darkness. There is likely nothing more astonishing than a sun rise, and I'm stunned by this view outside the window. My lingering sadness dissipates and I raise my arms with a long howl, welcoming the arrival of a new day.

My howling causes the horse to almost stumble, but the driver rights it and we continue on our way. I laugh, thankful it was just one howl, anymore and I'd be in the dirt right now with an overturned carriage. The day arrives and there are more travelers on the road, so I leave the carriage roof and go sit with the driver. He's a very hearty person, allowing me to sit there. He can tell I know martial arts, and hate being cooped up inside the carriage, so why am I not riding my own horse. I explain I've never learned to ride.

He pointed to Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao flying overhead, indicating I have a way with animals. If I practiced, he's sure I'll be a quick learner. As we head West, what was normally verdant land seems barren and run down, and I sigh about the ravages of war on the common people.

The driver sighed "Isn't that the truth. We've fought two wars with the Xiong Nu in the past year, with over ten thousand soldiers dead. How many wives lost their husbands, mothers lost their sons. Add to that a famine and money going towards war, where are the common people getting money to survive. When the battles are won, only the powerful are rewarded, and the common people continue to suffer."

I am pleased with how thoughtful he was, and he explained that he is learned and during his many travels now as a driver, he's had the chance to meet many people and hear different points of view. I ask if it's true that there has been cannibalism in the region, and he confirms it happened during the early Han dynasty history when there were deadly natural disasters.

I discuss how Emperor Qin Shi Huang built the Great Wall and sacrificed tens of thousands of men, leaving him reviled in history. But scholars now understand that without the Great Wall, the Xiong Nu would have breached the border long ago and many more people would have died as a result. But he asks why we must suffer now for the greater good of people who come after us. He also has a point and I cannot refute it.

I ask if he knows about the story of how a Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu tribe greatly insulted Dowager Queen Lu? After the death of the first Emperor of Han dynasty Liu Bang, the Shan Yu sent a letter to Liu Bang's Queen Yu. He said that since they were both widowers, they might as well just make do as a couple for the rest of their lives. It was a grievous insult, but since the Han Empire was still in its infancy and weak at that time, Queen Lu had to swallow her outrage and shame to be thus propositioned.

Since then, the Hans have send their princesses to be married to the Xiong Nu leaders to keep the peace. The hundred years of peace was purchased by the Han at the price of their most precious daughters, as well as offerings of gold. Our Han warriors are no weaker than the Xiong Nu, why must we bow to them and continue to supplicate before them?

He sighed, lamenting that he's old now. If he heard me talk as a young man, he would immediately enlist with the Great General Wei or General Huo to go fight the Xiong Nu. I laugh it off, telling him that I was merely playing devil's advocate to what he said, and throwing some thoughts around for discussion. He commented that while I look confident, perhaps I haven't made up my mind about life. I'm just happy I have him for company on this long road to talk with.

He tells me that to get to Xi Yu, the faster route is to Dun Huang city,

then passing through Long Xi, on to Xiu Zai, Zhang Ye, and finally past Xiao Ye Shi. I hear the words “Long Xi” and immediately tell him to not head there, even if we end up taking a longer way. I’ll even pay him more. He agrees and we bypass Long Xi and head directly to Liang Zhou.

When we arrive at Liang Zhou it is already completely dark. We find a clean inn to spend the night, with my requirements very low except for needing hot water and a big tub to take a bath. Life in Chang An is too comfortable, so three days on the road and I’m covered in dust and feel unbearable.

After changing water twice, I finally feel relaxed and clean. There are many hot springs outside of Chang An, but in the future I won’t have any hot springs to soak in. The hot springs in the Qing Estate.....don’t think about it, don’t think about it, forget everything in Chang An.

Suddenly there was a gust of cold air that blew into the room. I notice the door has been opened a crack “Girl, don’t boil anymore water, I still have another bucket I haven’t used.”

The door closed with a sound. I picked up my silk sash with the gold bells and sent it flying to catch on the bucket of hot water. When the bells are released, I can’t seem to pull it back. I’m perplexed, what did it get hooked on? I remember telling the serving girl to put the bucket behind the paper screen so that I can retrieve it easily. How did it get stuck? I didn’t misjudge the location!

Without a choice, I decide to stop being lazy and walk over there to grab it myself. I stand up in the tub, but give the sash one more jerk for good measure. The hot water bucket doesn’t fly over, and instead the entire paper screen falls over with a resounding thud.

Huo Qu Bing is standing there, dressed all in black, his figure ramrod straight. He’s holding my gold bells in his hand, staring at me with an expression of frigid darkness.

I am so shocked that I stand there for a good second, before reacting and diving back into the tub with a horrified yelp. I was just thinking the water was getting cold, but now my body is on fire.

Thank god I asked for an extra deep tub earlier, so now with my body submerged it's not as likely to be revealing anything. I huddle in the tub and stare wide-eyed at him.

His expression remains the same, his eyes staring directly at me without blinking. That kind of coldness, even across this distance I can feel the frost radiating from him. All my shame disappears under the piercing gaze of his frigid stare.

He's really angry this time. No, He's really, really, really angry this time. The angrier the other person is, the more I need to remain calm. When the enemy has the advantage, one can't upset him more. Otherwise I don't even know where to look to collect my bones.

I swallowed and forced myself to be calm "Don't insult my vanity. Under these circumstances, you ought to have a man's normal reaction. Either look at me lasciviously like a pervert, or try to be a gentleman and pretend to look elsewhere."

His expression still remains unchanged, just giving me one more icy glare before he suddenly threw the gold balls towards my head. I'm afraid to catch it with my bare hands, so I grab a robe from next to me and send it flying towards the gold balls. In the air the two form a Z, and I manage to defuse the velocity with which Huo Qu Bing threw it at me. If his strength is correlated to his anger, this time he's extremely mad.

After I retrieve the gold balls, I realize that the robe I grabbed was my night clothes. I lose my pretend cool and hurriedly pull the robe into the water, and I huddle even deeper inside the tub. The water has turned cold, the clothes are next to me, but I can't put it on. I can only stick my head out of the tub and look around, finally giving Huo Qu Bing a pitiful look.

His sarcasm is biting “You want me to have the normal male reaction, why don’t you have the normal female reaction when a woman is caught in the bath by a man?”

Did he not think I was embarrassed? I was afraid of making him even more furious so I suppressed it, but now it comes right back out “Are you sure you want me to have the normal female reaction? You won’t stab me in the back afterwards?”

“It doesn’t feel good to stay in the cold water, does it?” He smirked.

I look at him, and suddenly start screaming “Help!.....Help!.....There is a peeping tom.....a peeping tom.....”

His looked stunned and his eyes are finally not just reflecting icy coldness. “Now you should have the normal reaction” I pointed my finger at the window “Under these circumstances, you ought to be escaping through there.”

Footsteps sound on the hallway outside and get closer. “Where is the peeping tom?” “The sound came from the inside room.” “But a 40 year old woman is staying there” “How do you know a peeping tom might not like an older flower” “Yeah, some might like my experienced allure, and what do you mean I’m 40?” “Stop arguing, we need to help the girl, a young one is staying inside so we should kick the door in.” “But if we kick the door in, we’re no better than a peeping tom, let’s knock first.”

I inadvertently laughed, the He Xi people are so different than the Chang An people. These folks are just like the cutest wolves in the wolf pack. Huo Qu Bing’s expression is weird and then he walks straight towards me. Before I can scream, he pulled me right out of the tub. My body is wrapped in a towel and then completely enclosed by a blanket.

I’m angry, and frustrated, and embarrassed and I rage “You’re shameless!”

The noise outside the door quiets. But before the door is kicked in, Huo Qu Bing does behave like a normal person ought to in this instance, and he jumps out of the window. But I'm not sure if carrying me as he jumped was normal or not?

The moment he left the inn, a soldier immediately walked up to him. Based on his dress, it's not a low ranking soldier either. He averts his eyes, pretending that he's not seeing or hearing the me that is heaved over Huo Qu Bing's shoulder and currently screaming obscenities at him. He respectfully said "General, these are the two fasted mounts in Liang Zhou."

Huo Qu Bing swings on the horse and tucks me into his arms. I stopped yelling at him, worriedly asking "Where are you going?"

"Going back to Long Xi. By dawn we should be able to take a bath and be relaxed eating breakfast on the streets of Long Xi." He replied.

"Are you insane? I'm not going to Long Xi. My bags are at the inn, and my Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian. Let me go." I squirm in the blanket like a silk worm, trying to sit straight so I can argue with him.

"Someone will deliver your bags. I'm in a rush so I have no time to mess around with you. If you don't behave, I'm going to knock you out. You choose. Stay awake or get knocked out?"

His words are icy cold and hard as a rock, he is clearly not joking. I quieted for some time before looking for another avenue out "I'm not comfortable like this. I want to stick my arms out."

"I'm quite comfortable with you like this. Your arms are better behaved in the blanket. If you're comfortable, that will mean I'm uncomfortable."

"Huo Qu Bing, you are a horrible lascivious shameless....."

.....

“Did you hear me? I called you a pervert. You’re also a.....a jackass.....and a.....muttonhead....” I threw out every single insulting phrase I had ever learned in Chang An.

.....

When you are facing a brick wall, insulting and trying to punch it, but the brick wall has no reaction, in the end the end it’s myself that gets tired. I wearily and docilely rest in his embrace. The horse slowed down “I need to change horses” and before his words finished, he had jumped off one horse and onto another.

I was shocked “When you came, did you change horses like this?” “Yes.” “Aren’t you tired? Even the new horse is tired.” “When chasing the Xiong Nu army through the desert, not sleeping for three days and three nights is not uncommon. Chasing you is easier than chasing the Xiong Nu.”

I wondered “How did you get the news so fast?” He explained “Don’t forget that you are still in Han territory, and there are a lot of army bases in the He Xi region. Housekeeper Chen sent the fastest courier to bring your letter, which arrived in my hands that very evening. Tracking you took a bit of time, otherwise it wouldn’t have even taken three days.”

“That damn Hong Gu, not listening to my orders.” “She hasn’t even berated you, and you are yelling at her? How can a general desert the army, that is a capital offense.”

“I’m tired” and I brazenly tried to change the subject. “Close your eyes if you’re tired, you’ll be able to sleep well tomorrow” and he adjusted my position so that I was leaning on him more comfortably.

“This isn’t comfortable, I can’t fall asleep.” “You’re obviously not tired enough, if you were, you would be able to sleep even when riding a horse.” “Have you slept like that before?” “Yes.” “You won’t fall asleep

right now?" "No." "That's fine. I don't care if you tumble off a horse, just don't let me suffer." "Relax and sleep" His voice was calm, no longer angry or furious.

I huffed at him. Even though it wasn't comfortable, I actually nodded off. It was almost sunrise when we arrived at Long Xi. He just tossed me on a carpet and left without saying a word. Ay, he's still angry!

My body is sore, but I have no time to pity myself. I start plotting how to escape. The key is how to sneak away under Huo Qu Bing's watchful eyes. Once I enter the desert, I will become like a speck of sand. No matter the person, no one can find me.

I rolled around on the ground and managed to untie the outer sash. I dragged the blanket around looking for something to wear, but there was nothing. No wonder he just tossed me down and left. I was hopping around like a rabbit when he returned. He had bathed and changed, though it was still all black. The somber color on him looks wild and powerful, making him even more handsome.

Is this man made out of steel? From Liang Zhou to Long Xi round trip and he doesn't look remotely tired. I stare at him "Are you giving me clothes to wear?"

He tossed a package on the pallet and then walked out without a word. Why was it a set of black men's clothes? It even came with a white cloth to bind my chest. I railed at him for knowing even this. Even though this isn't ideal, having something to wear is better than nothing. I sigh and start to dress.

It's my first time wearing male attire, but I managed to put it on correctly. I walk around a few times and find myself rather charming. Huo Qu Bing has pulled open the door flap and is laughing at me "Fix your hair first before you start preening" reminding me that my hair is a mess.

Even though I can plait beautiful braids, I've never done a male

hairstyle before. After trying for some time, I still can't do it properly. Huo Qu Bing, who has been sitting behind me this entire time watching me, suddenly starts laughing. I violently use my hairbrush to hit his reflection in the mirror. If I can't hit him, hitting his reflection takes out some of my anger.

He suddenly took the hairbrush from me, and before I can ask why, he's already grabbed my hair and started combining the mess I made. His touch is gentle as he fixes my hair. Looking at the two of us in the mirror, this image seems so familiar. Many years ago, there was also a man who loved me that carefully brushed my hair and taught me to braid it. My nose started reddening and tears came to my eyes. I lowered my head and stared at the ground, letting him fix my hair and secure it with a jade circlet.

"There is still some time, I'll take you to the streets of Long Xi to walk around and grab a bite." He lightly said and didn't wait for my response before walking out.

I ask if the chef in the army base isn't good? "Any chef who cooks for me is the best in the Palace, but the little local Xi Yu dishes you like isn't his specialty." I take a few steps and suddenly grab his arm "Is Li Gan at this base?" He stared at me "He's not here" and I'm relieved and let go of his arm. "What exactly did you do to Li Gan that makes you so guilty around him?" I retort "Nothing, I didn't do anything to him that I need to feel guilty about."

He looked at me but didn't continue. As I walked, I continuously checked out the army base set up. Huo Qu Bing casually drawled "You seem to be quite energetic. Why don't you think about what you want to eat. If I wake up tomorrow and can't find you, I will order that every single army commanded by me change its food source to wolf meat. I will also request that all Xi Yu kingdoms and their citizens use wolf meat to welcome the Han army."

I angrily spit out "You wouldn't dare!"

He calmly said "Try me."

I glare at him but he doesn't seem to mind, instead smiling and walking forward. I continue to bore holes in his back. He walked further but didn't turn around, though his footsteps seem to slow. It's dawn and the Spring wind is mild. His figure, dressed in all black, doesn't seem to fit with the Spring light, giving off a sense of isolation.

My heart softened and I hurried to catch up to him. When he heard my footsteps, he didn't stop or turn around, but suddenly his figure seemed to blend into the warm Spring light. Even though I'm much shorter than him, but we're still taller than most people walking on the streets. We're suitable to be deemed dashing young men. Perhaps it's my brilliant smile, and the contrast to his icy cold look, but all the ladies and girls keep staring at me. I smile when I meet their eyes, the older ones smiling back and the younger ones averting their eyes with a blush.

Strolling on the street, I'm having a great time. If Chang An was a place where people were open, then Xi Yu is a place where people are bold. A flower girl threw a bouquet of plum blossoms in my arms, causing everyone to laugh and tease her. I remember that I'm pretending to be a man, so I bow to the flower girl. Huo Qu Bing, who is still poker faced next to me, tosses some money to the flower girl. She huffs and throws it back to him "Who wants your money? That was my gift to that gentleman."

It was likely the first time someone has angrily thrown money back at Huo Qu Bing, so he's startled for a moment. The crowd chides him for not understanding the Long Xi people's warmth. I drag Huo Qu Bing away and check out a few places before sitting down to eat. I see the forty-some lady owner and ask her for two bowls of fish noodles, but I call her big sister. She looks shocked and then pleased, smiling even more broadly when I give her the plum blossom bouquet. After we ate, Huo Qu Bing tried to pay but she refused to accept, saying she can afford to treat me to two bowls of fish noodles.

Since leaving the army base, Huo Qu Bing hasn't said anything to me, but suddenly he starts to laugh "I never knew you had the ability to eat free food." I proudly smile back at him.

He continues “You look like a boy when dressed like one, even when you walk you don’t resemble a girl. I can relax and let you stay in the army base, you can be my personal bodyguard.”

I sass back “You need to be careful. If you upset me, I can turn into your assassin at anytime.”

“Is Long Xi fun?” he asks, and I answer it’s fun. “If it’s fun, then it was worth coming. Can you stop being mad now?” I wearily reply “The legs are on my body, leaving is bound to happen. How long are you going to keep me here?”

He was silent for a moment “Until you lose all hope and don’t want to leave, or until I give up. Then I might let you go....or I might never let you go.”

I angrily kick the ground and shook my sleeve at me before stomping away. A Xiong Nu man was selling knives on the side of the street, in an area that is sparsely populated, and he’s not being very loud in soliciting customers. I was about to walk past when my eyes lit on something he was selling. I immediately turned back and he saw me staring at a knife. He put what he considered a good knife in front of me, but I just pick up a very uniquely designed knife. It was exactly like the knife I played with as a child. I ask him “Where did you get this knife?”

He stuttered and tried to explain in broken Han that he got it from someone, who got it from someone else. I sighed. During the commotion back then, who knew which guard got a hold of it and thus it passed out of the court. So many years later, through so many different hands, it’s back in mine. I ask how much to buy it, but he keeps wanting to sell me a better knife. Huo Qu Bing impatiently just tosses money at him, more than what he thinks it is worth. I tell the seller that this knife is worth much much more than that, so he should keep the money.

Most people would only see this intricately designed knife with a dull blade and think it is just a lady’s accessory. But they don’t know that it was a custom knife maker who was the best in the Xiong Nu world who crafted

it. Years ago, the Crown Prince of the Xiong Nu summoned that man, who used all his skill, to make this knife.

I clicked on a trap button in the knife, and then remember my anger from last night, so I raise my head towards Huo Qu Bing and huff “Let’s see if you dare be mean to me again!” before stabbing the knife into my chest. The knife seller gasped and Huo Qu Bing’s face lost every ounce of color. He wrenched me forward but it was already too late. The entire knife was buried in my chest and all he could do was hold my collapsed body in his arms.

I snuck a peek at him, wanting to scare him for a bit longer, but his hands, his entire body, was shaking, and the trembling actually made my heart hurt. I hurriedly got up and pulled the knife out with a giggle. When my hand touched the knife tip, it completely retracted into the handle. “Did you suddenly turn into a moron? It’s not like you haven’t killed a person before. When the knife enters the heart, how could there be no blood?” He stared at me and then roared “I am indeed a moron!” before turning around and storming off.

I ran after him “Please don’t be mad. My mischievous side suddenly came out so I wanted to joke around with you.” He refused to talk to me and continued to walk quickly, so I just followed behind him continuing to apologize. But he wouldn’t even turn to look at me.

If he wasn’t so concerned about me, with his battlefield experience, how could he not have seen that it was a joke? I remembered how pale his face looked and I feel really terrible and guilty. I softly explained “I know you’re not mad that I was joking around with you. You’re mad that I took a risk with my life to play that joke. What if the knife hadn’t work liked I expected?” I sighed “This knife was a gift for me from a childhood friend. I used it to scare my Papa, how could I not recognize it? There is also a compartment inside that can hide fresh blood, so when you stab it in your heart, blood gushes out and makes it look real. When I saw the knife back there, all I could think of was my childhood, and my naughty personality from back then came back out. I can’t believe so many years later, I actually found a childhood toy on the street.”

Perhaps it was the first time he had ever heard me talk about my childhood, so Huo Qu Bing's expression warmed a bit "You had a Papa?" I played with the knife in my hand "Did you think I was born this way? Of course I had a Papa who raised me."

He was silent and then said "Having a father, sometimes its like not having a father." I knew he was thinking of his birth father Huo Chong Ru, who got his mother Wei Shao Er pregnant out of wedlock which resulted in Huo Qu Bing. He refused to marry her and wed another woman. Huo Qu Bing grew up without a father, and until after Wei Zhi Fu married the Emperor that his mother was married to Chen Jang and became Mrs. Chen. It was then Huo Qu Bing had a father in name. I tried to change the subject and started chattering about this and that with respect to this knife. When I saw his face ease, only then did I relax.

When we returned to the base, he asked "Want to catch up on sleep?" I shook my head, I wasn't sleepy anymore. He led me to the stables and a fourteen year old boy soldier came out with a horse "Li Cheng might be young but he is a skilled rider. You need to quickly learn to ride from him."

I furrowed my brows "Not learning." He furrowed his brows and silently stared at me.

Suddenly the sound of thunderous clapping reached us. He still stared at me silently, and I stared right back at him. The clapping got more and more urgent, and he finally sighed. He leaped on the horse and took off. I quizzically asked Li Cheng "Why did he take off?"

He looked at me like I was an idiot "The General has to go count the troops! In about three to four days, the army will be deploying for battle with the Xiong Nu."

I wrinkled my nose and walked away, but Li Cheng quickly stopped me "General ordered me to teach you to ride a horse." I retort "I'm not learning." and want to walk around him, but he tightly grasped my arm "You must learn. If you don't learn, I can't fulfill my orders." I rolled my eyes "So? What does that have to do with me?" He was starting to sweat

“If I can’t finish, the General will have a bad impression of me. Then he won’t let me on the battlefield to fight the Xiong Nu.”

I sighed and tried to get him to release me, but who knew this little pipsqueak had this much strength. He pleaded with me “How can you not know how to ride a horse? The Xiong Nu are vicious. If you can’t ride a horse, if something happened you would be in danger. You would be a burden to everyone.”

My hand was about to strike his neck when it stopped. If something happened, the first person I would burden would be Huo Qu Bing “You’re still a kid. Why are not at home and here in the army?” His face stiffened “Last Fall, the Xiong Nu came to my city and killed my parents and sister.” I was silent and then slapped his shoulder “Little teacher, let’s go learn to ride a horse. But remember not to be impatient with me, or laugh at me, or call me stupid. Otherwise beware of my fist.”

He rubbed his eyes and nodded. From morning to noon until it was pitch black, other than having lunch and a short break, I learned to ride a horse. From the horse’s back to the ground, I repeatedly alternated between those two places. In the beginning he complimented me “Brother Jin, you may look like a dandy, but you are a strong feller.”

Gradually, his expression changed from admiration to awe to shock and finally to fear. Until the end, when he cried and begged me not to ride anymore. I stumbled into the tent, where Huo Qu Bing was studying a map. He saw my ragged state, raised his eyebrows and looked at Li Cheng. The kid cried and looked at me like I was a lunatic, explaining how I was coming along in riding. After Huo Qu Bing got the update, he smiled and asked Li Cheng to prepare a bath.

When Li Cheng took off, I immediately flopped on the pallet. My bones felt like it was about to collapse, and I was so weak I almost slid right on the floor. Huo Qu Bing sat next to me and touched my bruises “Does it hurt?” I kept my eyes shut and coldly huffed “Why don’t you take a couple dozen tumbles and let me know?”

He ordered me to turn around face down. “When you learn to ride for the first time, your back and waist will be sore. I’ll massage it for you.” I thought about it and turned around “Go light, my left shoulder really hurts.”

He lightly massaged my back and softly said “Riding a horse takes time to learn, why the rush? It’s like you want to learn to ride in one day.” I humphed “Who told me this morning to quickly learn to ride?” “I thought you wouldn’t do your best unless I said that.” I humphed again and didn’t respond. He continued “The army leaves tomorrow.”

I sat up in shock and turned my head to look at him “Leaving tomorrow? I just learned to ride fast, I can’t even turn or stop yet. If I’m not careful I’ll fall down. But....but I guess I can try. I think I’ll use a rope and tie myself to the horse so that I won’t fall off.”

Huo Qu Bing laughed at me “Stop being so insane. Who ever heard of a newbie learning to ride fast by the first day. You’re just using your martial arts skills to let that horse run wild, because you know you won’t die. If I let you tag along with the army, you’ll splinter the brigade. You don’t need to come with me, stay here and learn slowly.”

I gave him a questioning look and flopped back on the pallet “You’re not afraid of me running away?” He didn’t answer and a soldier brought a bath in. When the soldier saw me on the pallet, he pretended he didn’t see anything and quickly averted his eyes.

“Go wash! There are no maids here in the army, so just make do. If you care for it, I’d be glad to assist you.” and he pulled me up. I coldly huffed at him and then sauntered over to bathe, letting down the curtains.

“Yu Er, is something wrong with your mouth lately?” I was undressing and replied “What could be wrong?” “Instead of answering, you constantly humph and huff all the time, reminding me of a certain barnyard animal.”

"Humph!" I crawled into the tub and didn't bother to respond. He laughed outside "Anymore humphing, and I'll call you little piggy from now on." I comfortably laid down in the tub and closed my eyes, letting my weary bones coalesce back together.

"Yu Er, stay here in the army and wait for me to come back. I'll try my best to be fast. The quickest will be a few days, the longest will be ten days or more. I won't let you wait too long." I don't respond so he continues "I hear wolf meat is really unappetizing. I don't want to force myself to eat something disgusting."

I loudly humphed "Since you already decided, why are you asking for my thoughts?" He called my name but then a soldier arrived announcing that a package was delivered, plus a cage with two pigeons. I immediately opened my eyes, my two little ones are finally here.

"General, everything in the inn has been brought here. The two pigeons have refused food and water since last night, and when we try to force feed them, they become vicious." Those two little things, why are they that stubborn? After hearing this, I can care less about the hot water and quickly climb out to dry myself, rushing to go see them.

Huo Qu Bing said "No worries, they'll be fine when they see their owner."

"General, there is another matter. When we were leaving the inn, someone was asking around about the young lady staying in room number 2, and where she went....." The voice suddenly lowered and I tried to lean over to eavesdrop but couldn't make out what they were saying anymore.

When I heard footsteps leaving the room, I rushed out "Xiao Tao, Xiao Qian, Xiao Yu is here!"

Crouched inside their cage, Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian both quickly got up. I opened the cage and let them out, seeing their food and water are still full. I put some seeds in my hands and Xiao Tao immediately started

eating. Xiao Qian cocked his head at me, as if wondering why I abandoned them. I coax him to drink first, telling them not to blame me, blame HIM. I turned to give Huo Qu Bing a glare.

Huo Qu Bing walked over to me and watched them eat “Who knew these two pigeons were so emotional and stubborn. They would rather go hungry than eat from someone else.” I cleaned Xiao Tao’s feathers and laughed “Of course, in this entire world, other than me and Jiu.....” I stopped myself and took a deep breath, with a forced laugh “They only know me, they will not eat from anyone else.”

I wish I could smile more naturally, smile like I’ve forgotten everything. But I know I can’t, and my smile looks worse than crying. So I stop smiling and just quietly look at Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian eating their seeds. Huo Qu Bing suddenly stood up and walked to his table and lowered his head to look at the map.

I suddenly remembered earlier and asked “When my package was delivered, what was that about someone looking for me?”

Huo Qu Bing was drawing on the map and appeared not to have heard me. I asked again, and he responded without even raising his head “When you suddenly disappeared, the driver you hired was worried about you and looking for you.” I felt touched that he would worry about me.

Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao finished eating and returned to their cage to rest. I ask Huo Qu Bing “You didn’t rest at all yesterday, and you’re leaving first thing in the morning. Aren’t you going to sleep?” He tossed his brush and stretched “I do need to get a good night’s rest, otherwise it will be after this battle before I get another chance to sleep soundly.”

I yawned “Where am I sleeping?” He pointed to the inside room “You sleep in there, I sleep out here.” He ordered the room cleared and we went to bed. Laying on the pallet, I was about to think about all the crazy things that happened to me since yesterday, but I was so exhausted I just fell asleep immediately.

Right in the middle of a great sleep, I suddenly feel someone on the pallet, startling me awake. I immediately knew who it was and I turned around, facing outward. My eyes remained closed and I asked “What time is it? You’re leaving? But the sun hasn’t even come up yet?”

His low voice murmured “I’m leaving.” In the dark, his face comes closer and closer to mine, and I can feel his warm breath. My heart starts beating faster and faster, and I’m too scared to open my eyes. I keep my eyes closed and pretend I’m still half asleep.

“If you need anything, ask Li Cheng to get it done. Don’t be in such a rush to learn to ride a horse. Stay in the army base as much as you can. If you get bored then go find ladies to flirt with in the town. But remember always wear your male clothes.” I softly agreed and he didn’t say anything else, just silently sitting there looking at me.

After awhile, he lightly stroked my head “I’m off” and he stood up and walked outside. I couldn’t help myself and called out “Huo Qu Bing.” He turned around and looked at me. I slightly raised myself off the pallet “Please be careful.”

In the darkness came a smile as brilliant as the morning sun “I definitely will!”

Chapter 18: Emotional Threads

Li Cheng was moping, muttering under his breath “How could they say leave and leave so quickly? When I woke up the entire army base was empty.”

I can see he’s in no mood to teach me to ride so I practiced by myself. I stopped being so impatient and slowly got acquainted with the horse by trotting. I ended not falling off once, but after the morning was gone, Li Cheng was still sitting on the ground looking depressed.

I jumped off and walked over to talk with him, but he was so down that he answered once for my every ten questions. “Must you seek revenge?” He nodded, if he didn’t kill the Xiong Nu to avenge his family, then his life is meaningless. I stare at him, yet another person seeking revenge for the death of a loved one. “Little teacher, if you spar with me, and in one hundred strokes you don’t lose, then I promise to beg the General to take you along on the next battle.”

He raised his head “A real man makes good on his promises, right?”

I solemnly nod my head and he immediately gets up. He pulls out his sword and faces me. I make a stance “Will the Xiong Nu wait for you to attack?” and he immediately rushes me with his sword raised. My martial arts, if I was sparring with another person, I’ll likely lose. But if it was a life and death situation, the opponent will likely die. The wolf pack has the ability only to kill its prey, so everything I learned is used to kill. My attacks are extremely vicious, aimed at using the least amount of time to kill the opponent. Because of that, I have never really tested my martial arts skills, this being the first time.

In the beginning he was somewhat hesitant, but after I almost wrenched his elbow off, he stopped holding back and every attack became deadly vicious as well. After the fifty-first stroke, I aim for his eyes and then sweep him off his feet, his sword flying out. I clap my hands and crouch down “If I used a little bit more strength, your arm would be

useless. The Xiong Nu would never hold back their strength.”

He didn't say another word, just picking up his sword and attacking me again. I smile, this boy can be taught. There is no politeness on the battlefield. After six days, all I do is learn riding and spar with Li Cheng. He is very persistent. One time I punched him on the nose and he ignored his bloody nose and tears, continuing to hack at me. His last sword thrust actually sliced my sleeve. But he still only lasted eighty-seven strokes before I punched him out cold.

In six days time, Huo Qu Bing's army left Long Xi, and using the fastest imaginable speed and distance, quickly surrounded the enemy's flank and rear. The battle is swift and fierce. In a short six days, Huo Qu Bing's army is like the most devastating wind storm in the desert, swallowing up five Xiong Nu tribes, capturing and killing multiple officials and royal family members. In total, he killed or captured over eighty thousand Xiong Nu, allowing the Xiong Nu's most beautiful mountain region the Yen Zhi Mountains to fall into the hands of the Han Empire. The Han expansion continues westward.

The Xiong Nu's most revered speed army forces are no match for Huo Qu Bing's army, and in his first foray as a General, he's struck a major blow for the Xiong Nu. But the cost of this victory is steep indeed, with ten thousand men setting out and only three thousand returning. But this is the first time the Han army has used a swift attack formation against the Xiong Nu's typical swift attack, and it was a complete victory for the Hans. It was the first time an agricultural culture has battled a nomadic culture on horseback and emerged victorious. It may not remain the only time, but this was indeed the first such time in history.

I sit in the tent and hear the roaring cheers in the base. With this victory, the Emperor is sure to heavily reward everyone in the army, but right now those who returned alive are just happy to be here. The door opened and Huo Qu Bing was standing before me. He was covered in dirt and dust, his face completely exhausted. But his eyes were twinkling with joy. I smile and stand up “I thought you would go to the celebratory feast first!”

He didn't say a word but continued to smile warmly towards me. I avoid his eyes and try to be casual "I'm sure in seven days you haven't gotten off the horse. Go bathe first!"

Before I finished talking, he has collapsed on the pallet. I was so frightened that I went to assist him. He grabbed my hand and drowsily murmured "I'm spent. Even if the sky falls down I've got to sleep first." and with that, he was passed out.

I tried to withdraw my hand but before I can retract it, he gripped it even tighter. I softly sighed and sat down next to him. Under his black robe are traces of blood, and there are a lot of tears and slashes on his sleeve. There is a strange odor, and I sniff him to smell horse sweat mixed with the scent of blood. I immediately pull my nose back.

I pull a blanket to cover him, looking at him with a heart full of worry. From when the sun was in the middle of the sky until it was pitch black out, he slept like a dead pig, not moving a muscle. I tried to jerk my hand out of his, but in his sleep he actually slapped my other hand away. I now believe what he said about sleeping while riding a horse. He can probably sleep and kill the enemy at the same time.

Finally I can't stand it anymore, and lay down on the carpeted ground next to the pallet. I pull a corner of the blanket over me, but the horrible odor bothers me so I grab a scented handkerchief and put it over my face. That calms me down and I fall asleep.

The moment Huo Qu Bing takes the handkerchief from my face, I've already woken up. The tent is filled with brilliant sunlight, and I'm faced with an even more brilliant smiling face. I was a little startled and I kept staring at him.

"Haven't seen me in awhile, did you miss me?" His one hand was still holding my hand, and his other one was holding the handkerchief and he was using the handkerchief to tickle my face. I slap the handkerchief away "The moment you return I have to sleep on the ground. I must be sick in the head to miss you!"

“This is a huge pallet, why didn’t you just sleep on here?” and he was pulling me up there. I push him away “Keep dreaming!”

As we were pushing and pulling, my head landed on his shoulder and I smelled him again. I covered my nose “I beg of you, Master Huo, stop goofing around. You are stinking to high heaven. Hurry up and take a bath. I had to suffer your stink all last night.”

He lifted his arm and sniffed “I stink? How come I don’t smell it? You smell more carefully again, I think you made a mistake.” and he shoved his arm under my nose. I tried to hide while yelling at him “You’re doing this on purpose.”

In the pushing and pulling, he fell off the pallet with a hearty laugh. I wasn’t able to avoid him so he landed right on top of me. Suddenly the atmosphere between us changed immediately. The both of us turned silent. He stared at me, and his breathing became heavier. I want to avert my eyes but all I can do is stare right back at him. My heartbeat quickens. His face slowly descends and my body tightens. Right when his lips are about to touch mine.... “Brother Jin, aren’t you going to practice riding today? AHhh!.....” Li Cheng let out a horrified scream and immediately jumped right out of the tent and ran away. As he was closing the door, his voice shook “I didn’t see anything, I really didn’t see anything.....”

The second the door closed, I was released from the thrall and I immediately turned my face away. My cheek appeared to just brush past Huo Qu Bing’s lips. Huo Qu Bing angrily punched the ground and then said with a smile “Yu Er, you can’t keep ignoring it.” [He means this attraction between them, not necessarily the almost-kiss.]

I can’t figure out what I’m feeling so I just shove him without saying a word. He got up while I continued to lay on the ground and stare at the ceiling.

Huo Qu Bing laughed “I’m off to take a bath. When I come back, I’ll assess how your riding lessons have come along. It shouldn’t disappoint me.”

After he had been gone for some time, it was like I finally got my soul back, getting up and washing. After I splashed cold water on my face, I felt more alert. But I buried my face in the towel, my emotions a jumbled mess.

“Brother Jin” Li Cheng cautiously called out to me. I turned around and he was quite down “After breakfast, let’s go riding.” As he ate breakfast, he warily looked at me “Brother Jin, if you are feeling down, we don’t have to go riding today.”

I raised my head to look at him, and suddenly realized what he was probably thinking in his head. I almost spit out my steamed bun, causing me to cough a few times. I slapped him on the head “What is a kid like you thinking about! You need to focus on learning martial arts instead of thinking random thoughts.”

He rubbed his head, pitying himself, with his eyes wide-open, his nose all bent out of shape and his mouth re-arranged, face all swollen, giving me a sympathetic look.

I was afraid of choking so I stopped eating, making an effort to smile extra wide, wondering how to get rid of this kid’s shadowy thoughts. “That was all a misunderstanding earlier. The General’s martial arts is nowhere as bad as yours. We were well-matched in sparring. During the fight, we accidentally fell on the ground, and that is when you walked in on us and misunderstood.”

It’s so easy to hookwink a kid and Li Cheng immediately brightened up. He continued eating and was hollering about how he was going to spar with me today. When Huo Qu Bing arrived, we had just taken the horses out. He saw how lively I was, and how beaten up Li Cheng was, and couldn’t help himself and asked “When I ordered him to teach you to ride, even if you weren’t happy about it, there was no need to beat the crap out of him?”

I smirked and didn’t answer, but Li Cheng quickly replied “Brother Jin is teaching me martial arts, he wasn’t beating me up.”

Huo Qu Bing shot me a shocked look “Teaching martial arts? If all the teachers taught this way, then no one would dare learn martial arts.”

I slapped the horse and got on “This is the only method I know how to teach, letting him learn when he is facing life or death. There are no strokes, just learning how to kill the opponent with one shot.” Huo Qu Bing laughed and got on a horse, telling Li Cheng “You don’t need to teach today, go get some rest!”

Li Cheng said yes, and I told him to go find the older brothers who have just returned from battle and ask to fight them. They are all surely still itching to fight and will make great sparring partners. He happily ran off.

Huo Qu Bing and I rode side by side “Are you raising a baby wolf? Be careful he doesn’t get his legs broken by my wolves.” I giggled “I already warned him! Great sparring partners means he ought to have the understanding he might get the tar beaten out of him. He might turn from a baby swollen pig head into a big swollen pig head.”

Huo Qu Bing laughed “I was just thinking what good luck he had, that you were willing to teach him. Now I think it was his bad luck to run into you.” I glared at him “Both his parents died by the hands of the Xiong Nu, did you know that?”

He answered “No, I didn’t. There are so many soldiers here I can’t possibly know their life stories. I am only concerned whether they are capable. I found this kid to teach you to ride at the recommendation of Zhao Puo Nu.” I explain that I promised Li Cheng that if he could withstand one hundred strokes from me, I will endeavor to get him on the battlefield. Huo Qu Bing replied “The way you are teaching him, he ought to get on the battlefield. But first, let’s look at your riding skills these past few days” and then he kicked his horse and was off.

I was eager to show off my improvement to him, so I hurried to catch up to him. But he wasn’t trying to race me on speed, instead turning left and right, and then making a U-turn. Try as I might, I couldn’t keep up with him, with each turn pissing off my horse so that I almost got thrown a

few times.

When fighting Li Cheng I'm totally in control, but a few runs with him and I'm covered in sweat. While he was perfectly composed, only smiling at me. Not being able to show off to him left me depressed and I dejectedly jumped off the horse and sat on the ground. He sat next to me "You're riding very well. The improvement in the last few days far exceeded my expectations." I gave him a disbelieving look and he laughed "I'm not trying to make you feel better, I'm being serious."

I couldn't help but smile a tad. "Yu Er, tomorrow I have to take some troops back to Chang An." My smile immediately disappeared and I rested my head on my knee, moping and staring at the ground. "Don't worry, I won't force me you return to Chang An with me. But you can't secretly run back to the desert either. Aren't you teaching Li Cheng martial arts? Keep practicing your riding and I'll be back as soon as possible."

I didn't say anything and he sat there quietly. Suddenly the horse whined and broke our silence. Huo Qu Bing laughed "You ought understand now the joy of riding. Forcing you to learn is not just hoping that one day you can ride and roam the world with me. But it's believing that you surely will love riding like the wind. I don't want your life to miss out on this pleasure." He pulled me up "Come, let me teach you my secret horse riding skills."

It was the middle of the night and I was sleeping soundly, when suddenly I felt a body slip under the blanket with me. I was about to rage and use my elbow to poke his stomach when Huo Qu Bing quickly pulled me into his embrace. He enveloped my struggling body and lowly whispered "Yu Er, I'm not intending anything. I'm leaving tomorrow, and I just want to lay here and rest for a little bit. Don't kick me, I'll just lay on the pallet and I won't touch you."

I thought for a moment and then quieted down. He let me go and moved away. I scooted inside and opened up more room on the pallet for him. He whispered "Thank you" and then slid a bamboo stick into my hand. "What is this? Why does it feel like a fortune telling stick?"

“It is a fortune telling stick. It’s the very one you asked for.”

My heart lurched, remembering that day when I threw the stick away. And I immediately remember him standing under the acacia tree, not moving. He actually went back and found the stick. My heart filled with this soreness and hurt, and in the pain there was this odd warmth and comfort. The pain quickly subsided, so that I couldn’t immediately understand what I was feeling, and where these feelings came from.

“The words on the fortune telling stick are: the vast silver desert, chasing love wishing for twin stars; the unending yellow sand, burying the shadow of sadness.”

I thought about it but couldn’t understand the meaning. Is it about me hoping for twin stars, and ending up with only a shadow of sadness? I though the first verse applied to Huo Qu Bing, but I couldn’t understand the second verse. I didn’t want to overthink it “The fortune telling sticks are forever filled with these nebulous statements.”

He said “I just had a nightmare, a dream that when I returned from Chang An, I couldn’t find you. I rode a horse without stopping, but I couldn’t find you. Yu Er, can you promise me, now matter what happens, please don’t just leave. Wait for me to return.”

In the darkness, his eyes were missing his usual arrogance and confidence, and in its place was uncertainty. He was quietly looking at me, and didn’t force me and didn’t beg me. His emotions were crystal clear, just revealing his longing. It made my heart hurt, and before I could think it through, the words were already out of my mouth “In the future, I will never leave without a word. Even if I leave, I will say goodbye to you properly.”

He smiled “I will make it so that you will never want to part from me.”

This guy, you give him an inch, he takes a foot. I coldly huffed and

turned my back to him “Oh right! When you return to Chang An, don’t tell anyone where I am.” He was silent for some time “Anyone?” I thought of Li Yan, Hong Gu and those folks “Yes.” He agreed. I turned my head to him “It’s almost dawn, you should try to get more sleep.”

He smiled, nodded his head and then closed his eyes. I also closed my eyes, but my mind couldn’t rest. If Li Yan knew I was with Huo Qu Bing, maybe she will destroy Luo Yu House immediately. I thought I could just leave a few letters and then jump out of the pit of fire that was the mess of politics in Chang An. But life really is like the complicated vines Huo Qu Bing mentioned, it’s not something I can just turn my back on and forget everything.

My mind was still churning so I didn’t know when I fell asleep. When I woke up, the pallet beside me was empty. I don’t know if his movements were light as feather, or I slept that soundly, but I didn’t know when he left. I touched the place where he laid and sat there in a daze.

.....

“One hundred!” Li Cheng tossed his sword aside and collapsed on the ground in exhaustion. I wrinkled my brow at him “If you don’t want to die before you reach the battlefield, go patch yourself up now.” He smiled at me before leaving “One hundred strokes, Brother Jin. You make good on your promise.”

I smiled and nodded “I will. Go get yourself fixed up and I’ll take you out to eat on the town tonight.” In town, I ordered a stewed chicken with dates, which made him disappointed. I thought it was already better than what they served in the base, but he said it was too light, like what a woman would eat after she gave birth. I laughed, and told him that he was lacking blood lately so this was perfect.

Two men finished eating and left, and I chanced to see the wolf brand on the bottom of their horse flanks. It looked familiar but I couldn’t place it. I ask the waiter if those two men were locals? He wasn’t sure, they appear to be retainers of a rich family, looking for a girl who was lost.

Life became simple and quiet. Everyday I sparred with Li Cheng or riding, playing with Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian, or wandering around whiling away the time. Right when I'm getting bored, Huo Qu Bing's letter arrived.

".....I am with General Gong Xun Aou deploying from the North, and Li Gan has also deployed this time....." I frown "Don't frown, he's with his father General Li Guang, and we're going our own ways. We likely won't meet until the very end. Once you receive this letter, go with the courier North and we'll meet at the Northern base."

The courier reminded me that he was to take me to the Northern base. I sighed, agreeing to go, but requesting that I bring Li Cheng with me. I can tell the courier is nervous and tell him to relax. He tells me that not only the General tasked him with this, his own father told him that he could not fail in this mission. Turned out the courier Chen An Kang was the son of Housekeeper Chen, and of course he knew I was really a girl in disguise.

I handed him the cage and got ready to leave. During the carriage ride, I feigned sleep while Li Cheng was all excited and bugging Chen An Kang for information about the battles. Having gotten used to riding, the carriage feels especially comfortable. Before I knew it, we had arrived at the Northern base.

I had just jumped out of the carriage when I was immediately pulled into Huo Qu Bing's embrace. He whispered in a low voice "I haven't seen you in a month, I've been worried for a month. I was worried that one day I would wake up and receive a letter saying that you had left. Thank goodness you may not always tell the truth, but at least you keep your promises."

This guy seriously does whatever he wants without a care for what others might think. I try to push him off me but he holds my shoulders tight and doesn't budge. Chen An Kang has his head down, currently analyzing the soil of the Northern region with intense concentration. But Li Cheng looks stunned and stares at us with his eyes wide open.

I let out a long sigh. What lie can I concoct this time? What kind of

martial arts requires embracing to practice?

Chapter 19: Pigeon Souls

The army is leaving after resting for two days. Huo Qu Bing and Gong Xun Aou discuss how to attack the Xiong Nu from both sides in tandem, while General Li Guang's army brings up the rear. In the blue black sky, there isn't a single star, just a crescent moon shining coldly on the earth. Under the sound of horse hoofs, with thousands of armor glittering, there is only unending dust before and behind me. I feel a sense of inexplicable uncertainty.

Huo Qu Bing looked at me and reached out to grab my hand "Don't worry, I won't let the Xiong Nu hurt you." I bit my lip "I'm worried about Li Cheng. Was I wrong? I don't know the cruel dangers of the battlefield. The moment he gets on that horse is life and death. It's not like having good fighting skills means survival."

Huo Qu Bing's hand is around his horse whip, his eyes look straight ahead with a coldness like the shiniest moon "If killing the Xiong Nu is his greatest wish in life, then even if he dies, it's doing something he wanted. There will be no regret. Does he want to live an ordinary life? No one can guarantee whether they will survive in a battle."

I smirked at him "That was contradictory. Didn't you just promise nothing would happen to me?" He turned and smiled at me "That is because I am Huo Qu Bing, and you are the exception."

I wrinkled my nose at him but still smiled, the worries of moments ago having dissipated. After traveling for a day and a night, the army finally sets up camp. I tried to prepare myself, but after such a long time on a horse, my hips and waist feel like it doesn't belong to me. When I heard Huo Qu Bing call for rest, my body slid off the horse and I laid down on the ground. Huo Qu Bing sat down next to me "Now you now how hard I work to earn my money? In the future don't spend it so easily."

Chen Kang An suddenly walks up and with a somber expression announces that there has been no communications with the armies led by

the other generals. Huo Qu Bing asks him to keep trying to reach them, and especially not to reveal word that we have not been able to reach General Gong Xun Aou.

I thought about it, and based on my extensive reading of military texts, I know the proper response is to retreat. If the army you are coordinating an attack with suddenly disappears, plus the rear flank is also unreachable, then this battle is a mess before it has even started. Huo Qu Bing paced a few times and told me to get some rest and not think too much. He actually laid down and went to sleep.

That confused me so. He wasn't thinking of what to do under these circumstances. But then I thought about it some more and decided that if he wasn't freaking out, I shouldn't be either. If the sky fell he would be the first person hit. I curled up and went to sleep.

Before the sun even rises the army is ready to leave. There is still no word from Li Guang or Gong Xun Aou. Huo Qu Bing laughs that Li Guang has gotten lost in the past, but now it appears Gong Xun Aou has also gotten lost. I ask what to do, and he points to the distant Qi Lian Mountain "We're going there."

I immediately let out my pent up breath and stare at the Qi Lian Mountains. My emotions calmed down. He's not new to fighting alone. The first time he took eight hundred troops and sneaked into the Xiong Nu army base. Next he took ten thousand troops and with the speed of the wind destroyed five Xiong Nu tribes in six days. Even though the plan had changed, he can handle fighting alone.

Qi Lian Mountain is rich and fertile, the place where the Xiong Nu herd their livestock. It is also one of their pride and joys. This battle will not be easy, but if we win, Papa will surely be very happy. Papa....

He saw me staring at the mountains, apologizing "I thought this battle would be easier, who knew we'd be rushing yet again." I gather myself, not wanting him to worry, acting casual "I won't let you make us wolves seem useless.""

He smiled and nodded his head, then flew off towards the front of the army. The rising sun reflected off his back, with the armor giving off a thousand beams of light. It was like a flying sun, breathtaking to behold in its majesty.

Huo Qu Bing's forces were already the most fierce, but after he threw some fuel in the fire, they were even more revved up to go. Ten thousand fearless men marched behind him, traversing this great North Western territory.

After we traveled for awhile, I asked Chen An Kang why we appeared to be heading back. He looked around, unable to confirm because this Gobi Desert looks all the same to him. I tell him to go ask the General if he knows he's walking backwards. Otherwise he can laugh about General Gong Xun getting lost and then he ends up getting lost himself.

After a few moments Huo Qu Bing returns to my side and explains that the Xiong Nu have gotten word of where the army is expected to move, so he needs to change directions otherwise they will lay in wait for us. I look at the circling falcons above and remain silent. He continues "I've been around the desert many times with Uncle since I was a kid. I can walk around here without getting lost. And with you here, I can relax and let us wander aimlessly. If we get the Xiong Nu confused, then it will be better for the attack."

I turn and ask the person holding the cage to be careful and not let Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian out, but I can see they are frustrated with being cooped up.

From morning until evening we rushed around, and Huo Qu Bing's expression grew more and more concerned. After turning in the Gobi Desert a few times, the Xiong Nu ought not to be able to track us, yet they are still able to know where the army is. There is still a tracker following a distance behind the army.

During dinner, he doesn't eat and I ask what he is thinking about. "With our speed, and this random moving around, the Xiong Nu shouldn't

know our every move. This has never happened before. Usually we attack the Xiong Nu, but this time they are chasing us.” He furrowed his brows and looked perplexed.

I point to the sky and he looks upward. In the sky are two tiny black specks. He startled and then asked “Are you saying those two furry beasts are the Xiong Nu’s tracking agents?”

I laugh and nod “Those guys are the most annoying. In the past when we would capture a prey, they would circle overhead and try to steal our prey. Sometimes they would even fight with the wolves for it. Because they can fly, the wolves can’t do much except chase them away. But they would fly away and then dive back down to fight. Since I’ve tangled with these guys in the past, I can tell that those two above are behaving unusually. Instead of looking for prey, they continue to follow us and stay above our heads.”

Huo Qu Bing smiled bitterly “I had heard the rumor that pigeons can pass word for their owners, but now this other legend has come true. Just my luck to run into it. I wonder how many the Xiong Nu have trained?”

I respond “Their nests are always in hard to reach places so it’s hard to capture a young one. They are arrogant and love freedom, so unless they were raised from infancy, they won’t listen to human commands. For the Xiong Nu to have two is rare enough, otherwise this wouldn’t just be a legend. Also, you wouldn’t have been able to sneak into the Xiong Nu base with your eight hundred men.”

He laughed and slapped his legs “Just two? That’s easy! Tomorrow I’ll serve it each an arrow and we’ll dine on roasted bird tomorrow night.”

Shooting down birds is not a hard task, but those two have been well trained, so all morning they circled just above the reach of any flying arrow. There remains no opportunity to shoot them down, and I’m beginning to get impatient and go check on them. Huo Qu Bing doesn’t have his usual impetuosity, and instead looks calm and determined. Right now he’s like an experienced wolf, laying in wait for his prey. No

matter how many days, no rush and no worries, just scouting the prey and waiting for the right moment to give it a deadly blow.

Suddenly there was a roar and I looked up to see a black spot hurtling towards the ground. At that time, there was a cry and the other falcon follows it down. But an arrow just barely misses it, and it immediately pulls back up and circles once again outside the reach of the arrows. The other archer kneels and begs forgiveness for his failure, while Huo Qu Bing just looks solemnly at the remaining falcon in the sky. I worriedly look towards Huo Qu Bing, knowing this is not good.

These two falcons have been trained and have better instincts than wild ones. With this fright, it will not give us another chance to shoot at it. The Xiong Nu will clearly be enraged by the death of their valuable agents, meaning we might soon be engaged in a battle, one in which the enemy knows us but we do not know the enemy.

Huo Qu Bing suddenly looked at me and his face broke into a wide smile, full of confidence. He was just like the noon sun over the Gobi Desert, shining his light over everything and leaving no shadow. I'm affected by his attitude and I can't help but smile a little. Even I'm influenced by his confidence, much less his troops who trained under him and fought with him. In two battles, he has had an overwhelming victory, so his Yu Lin Army brothers trust him implicitly. It's like as long as they are following Huo Qu Bing, no matter the enemy ahead, they will prevail. That is the confidence he instills in every soldier.

Because the army needs a lot of water, Huo Qu Bing asks me where the nearest water source is. We decide to head to the Ju Yen Sea, the name comes from the Xiong Nu language to mean weak water in flowing sands. It is situated within Xiong Nu territory.

The lone falcon continues to follow us and Huo Qu Bing would occasionally look up at it, though he never looked concerned. As we neared the Ju Yen Sea, Chen An Kang and another young man named Zhao Puo Nu came over and gave me a strange look. Zhao Puo Nu spoke up "The Xiong Nu must know now that we are headed to the Ju Yen Sea, so this

upcoming battle is unavoidable. But having the Xiong Nu aware of our moves puts us always at a disadvantage. Your servant I have an idea for killing that falcon.”

I knew what he was getting at and huffed coldly before turning away. Huo Qu Bing told them to never mention this again. Zhao Puo Nu kneeled down “General, using the pigeons as bait, as long as we shoot the falcon first, the pigeons won’t be harmed. And even if the pigeons are sacrificed, it is for the greater good of the army. When we return to Chang An I will personally buy the Brother here two pigeons.”

I glared at Zhao Puo Nu and stalked away with the slash of my whip. I grabbed the pigeon cage and refused to let anyone handle it. Only next to me do I feel safe. Chen An Kang rode next to me for some time and asked me not to be mad anymore. The General didn’t agree with their proposal, right? I kept staring ahead and he had no choice but to be quiet. I tell him to bring Li Cheng over here, I’m worried about him.

The lake is clear and surrounded by verdant greenery. The sky and the clouds reflect on the surface, and with a wind blowing through, small ripples sway and dance. Near the lake are some cranes dancing in the water and ducks taking flight. Li Cheng gaped at this beauty, that the Xiong Nu have such beautiful lands. I was about to explain how I played here as a kid, but I stopped talking.

When suddenly a thousand water fowls loudly cried out in fright and then took flight, Huo Qu Bing was the first to raise his bow and arrow. It’s not like I haven’t experienced a life and death struggle before, but being in the middle of a battle of tens of thousand is the first time I realized that what I experienced before was comparatively child’s play.

The horses wail and the people roar. The swords slash in the air, the beauty of the lake marred with one cold slash after another. The red of the blood splatters everywhere, almost like a red flower blooming for just a moment before immediately wilting. I can’t see what is happening, everywhere around me is just blood and fighting. Chen An Kang shook me “The first time on the battlefield I almost peed my pants, you’re doing

better than me, your face is just ghostly white.” I know he’s trying to distract me but I am speechless.

I suddenly look around for Li Cheng, and Chen An Kang thinks the kid probably ran to the front. I was so angry I wanted to slap myself. I jumped on a horse and want to take off but Chen An Kang refuses to let go “You cannot go to the front line, these are the General’s orders. And even if you go now you can’t do anything, you won’t be able to find Li Cheng. You haven’t practiced with the army before so you don’t know how to fight in tandem, so you’ll just distract the soldiers. You need to wait here until the fighting is done.”

I tightly grasp the horse reins and stare straight ahead at the violent battle. Chen An Kang softly said “Once on the battlefield, life and death is but a moment’s difference. What was yesterday’s drinking buddy might be fallen before you tomorrow.”

My heart suddenly wrenched into a tight knot, my body still as can be. I calmly asked “Then....the General....he will be fine?”

Chen An Kang was silent for a moment “There are no guarantees on the battlefield. But the General has been training with the Yu Lin Army since he was a child. He also learned directly from the Great General Weil. With his experience, he will be fine.”

The blood of the Xiong Nu, the blood of the Han, I cannot tell why my heart is shaking. I look skyward, making certain that the blue sky and the white clouds still remain unchanged.

The Xiong Nu army is defeated and retreats, leaving the Ju Yen Sea returned to it’s normal tranquility. Except for the smell of blood and a sea of dead bodies littering the area. I see eagles circling overhead, waiting to feast. I looked around and Huo Qu Bing rode up to me “Are you alright?” I force a smile and nod, but my eyes are still searching through the crowd. Chen An Kang pointed “Isn’t that Li Cheng?” and there Li Cheng stood holding a sword and waving to me. I finally relaxed and waved back. He was so excited, yelling “I finally avenged my family, I helped defeat the

Xiong Nu.....”

Suddenly an injured Xiong Nu soldier heaved himself up and threw a dagger at Li Cheng. “Watch out!” I cried as I rushed towards him, but I was too far away and couldn’t use my gold bells to deflect the dagger. I could only watch it embed itself in Li Cheng’s chest. An arrow flew past me and pinned the injured Xiong Nu soldier dead to the ground.

Li Cheng stared at the dagger in his chest and then looked at me, confused as to what was happening. I held him in my arms and tried to stop the bleeding as Chen An Kang called for a medic. Huo Qu Bing walked over and took a look, indicating to me that it was a clean stab right into the heart.

Li Cheng asked if he was about to die, and then told me not to be sad. He had killed Xiong Nu and was now going to see his parents and his sister. He missed them so much.... His hands grew cold and I watched as the blood drained out of him. My heart felt cold, knowing this was all my fault, my fault.....

Huo Qu Bing quietly stood next to me and looked out over the Sea. I gently laid Li Cheng down and walked over to the edge of the water to wash the blood of my hands. Huo Qu Bing looked at me, and then ordered Li Cheng’s body to be cremated. He walked over to me and bent down to wash his hands “After the war is over, I’ll have his ashes sent back to be cremated with his family, so he’s not lonely.”

I raised my head to look at the circling eagles, and I can’t differentiate the tracking falcon anymore.

The horses are thundering forward and I remain silent. Huo Qu Bing continues to silently ride beside me. I occasionally raise my head to look at the falcon and then resume riding. As I looked towards the sky once again, Huo Qu Bing spoke up “It’s not your fault, so stop blaming yourself. There will be deaths in battle, and this is something Li Cheng knew when he joined the army.” I stare at the sky “If I didn’t promise he could go to battle, he might still be alive.”

Huo Qu Bing was exasperated “You’re so obstinate. Without you Li Cheng would find a way onto the battlefield. As a man he needs to stand up for what he believes in. Between revenge and going on with his life, if you let Li Cheng choose again, he would still choose to go to battle.”

I looked at Huo Qu Bing “If we don’t shoot down that damn bird, we won’t be able to arrive safely at Qi Lian Mountain.” He tells me to be patient, that falcon can’t be alert all the time.

I look at Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian “The armies have been split into three routes, but now General Li Guang and General Gong Xun Aou are nowhere to be found. We are in the middle of Xiong Nu territory, and our advantage is a sneak attack. If we keep waiting, we might all end up dead at the base of the Qi Lian Mountains.

I touched the cage and slowly opened the door. Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian, having been cooped up for so long, happily jump on my arm. I tell Huo Qu Bing “Prepare your bow and arrow.” I lightly stroked their head and whispered “I’m sorry, sending you to do such a dangerous mission. Don’t get close to the falcon, just lure it lower. You have to do your best to fly as fast as you can.”

Huo Qu Bing called “Yu Er!” indicating that he was ready. I waved my arm, sending Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao into the air. I pick up the whistle around my neck and begin to blow into it, ordering Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao to lure the falcon lower. Xiao Qian circles overhead, still uncertain, but Xiao Tao has already dived straight for the falcon. Xiao Qian has no choice but to quickly fly behind Xiao Tao.

That falcon is well trained, because with food so near it remains uninterested and continues to circle high overhead. Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao try to lure it from a distance for quite some time but cannot tempt it. Xiao Tao suddenly rushes the falcon, ignoring my shock and attempts to summon her back, flapping her wings right in front of it a few times before flying away.

Falcons are one of the most vicious predators in the animal kingdom,

and this one has likely never seen a bird so disrespect it. It becomes enraged and lets out a piercing cry and swoops with its sharp claws straight for Xiao Tao. I desperately blow my whistle to summon them back. Xiao Tao tries to descend but a pigeon is no match for a falcon's speed and soon she is right under the grasp of the falcon's claws.

To save Xiao Tao, Xiao Qian ignores my whistles to descend and instead swoops in to peck at the falcon's eyes. The falcon spreads its wings and Xiao Qian is swept aside. Xiao Qian's body falls from the sky and the falcon zooms down to grab him when suddenly an arrow pierces its chest and it falls straight to the ground.

Xiao Qian descends in a shaky fashion and I rush over to catch him. Before he lands on my hands a few drops of blood hit me first. When Xiao Qian lands on my arm, he cannot even stand. His head lolls to one side and he falls on the ground. I catch him before he hits the ground, but his eyes are closed. One wing and an entire side of his chest is covered in blood. My hands shake uncontrollably. Xiao Tao cries out and uses her head to butt Xiao Qian's head. Xiao Qian opens his eyes to look at Xiao Tao, and with one final shudder his eyes shut for good.

The medic touches Xiao Qian and then turns to shake his head at Huo Qu Bing. I'm cradling Xiao Qian in my hands, like knives slicing into my heart. Xiao Tao uses her beak to fix Xiao Qian's feathers and coo'd pitifully a few times. I have never seen Xiao Tao so patient or gentle before. I can't control my tears anymore and drops start to fall on Xiao Qian. I keep saying over and over "I'm.....sorry.....I'm.....sorry...."

Xiao Tao turned to look at me and rubbed her head on my hand, comforting me. She used her beak to fix Xiao Qian's feathers one more time and then suddenly took flight. I look up at Xiao Tao as she flies higher and higher. I suddenly react and start blowing my whistle. Come back. Come back now.

Xiao Tao continues to fly higher and higher. I start screaming "Xiao Tao, come back! Come back! You're not allowed to leave me all alone! You're not allowed to leave me!" Before I finish speaking, a black dot

comes hurtling from the sky and Xiao Tao slams into the ground. The army has been watching in silent shock at the pigeon and falcon battle, and now with Xiao Tao's passionate act, everyone gasps. My voice is stuck inside my throat and I can't make any sound. My eyes are wide open and can only stare at Xiao Tao's body laying far away. I slowly sink to the ground.

Huo Qu Bing covered my eyes "Don't look anymore."

I violently jerked his hand off but he grabbed my arm. I started to hit him "This is all your fault, all your fault! Why did you make me follow you....."

"It's all my fault, it's all my fault. I will make sure the Xiong Nu pays for this." Huo Qu Bing gently said to me as he took a wet cloth from the army medic and placed it over my nose. I smelled a fragrant scent of flowers and my strength in hitting him decreases. My mind clouds and I lay on his shoulder, passing out.

Chapter 20: Deflowered

When I open my eyes again, I find myself in Huo Qu Bing's embrace. In the dark night, with the vast desert, the only sounds are the horse hooves. I look at the two or three faint stars in the sky, my heart completely empty. Mischievous Xiao Tao, constantly destroying things Xiao Tao, loves to annoy me Xiao Tao. Gentle Xiao Qian, always taking care of Xiao Tao's Xiao Qian.....

"Awake?" Huo Qu Bing lowered his head and looked at me. I was silent for some time before answering "Where are we? Xiao Yue Shi?"

He raised his head and looked towards the distance "You've slept for a day and a night now. We've passed Xiao Yue Shi, and are almost at the Qi Lian Mountains. You're familiar with the Qi Lian Mountains, right?" I softly answered yes. My body feels weak but I straighten myself "I want to ride by myself." He gently said "You were so distraught back there so the doctor upped the dosage to knock you out. Even though you are awake now, you likely can't exert any strength. I'll take you the rest of the way." I was silent and then nodded my head.

In the darkness the shape of the mountains grows closer. In the distance comes the sound of wolf howls. My heart lurched and I tightly gripped Huo Qu Bing's arm "Can you hurry? I hear....." I bit my lip and swallow the rest of what I wanted to say, only turning my head towards the Qi Lian Mountains.

Huo Qu Bing urged his horse faster and quickly bypassed everyone, rushing straight ahead. Gradually we've left everyone behind. I turn to give him a startled glance and he just smiles "I hope it's that wolf of yours."

A few wolves are lurking in the base of the mountains eyeing us. My heart leapt and I howled towards the Qi Lian Mountains. Huo Qu Bing's horse almost stumbled and wanted to throw me off. From the mountains came a distant howling, joining my howl and reverberating through the hillside. The horse continued to go wild so Huo Qu Bing had no choice but

to get off the horse, holding me and leaping to the ground.

I immediately tear myself from his embrace and he doesn't stop me. He lets me howl and run towards the wolves at the base of the mountain. I can't believe that when they saw me, they gave a few low howls and then ran away with their tails twitching. All my emotions hit a roadblock and I angrily yelled "Wolf 89, why are you hiding from me? You don't recognize me?" A few small wolves came out and looked at me, and I tried to gesture for them to come over. They were getting close when their mother howled and they hid again. I stomped my foot "I won't force you to go warm yourself next to a fire."

Huo Qu Bing stood to the side and laughed, shaking his head "Yu Er, I thought you were the princess of the wolves, and the wolves would come welcome you back. But it appears no one wants to see you right now."

I glared at him and I hear a wolf howl getting closer and closer, with a final resounding howl that shook the trees. A silver wolf bounded out from the forest directly for me. I leaped forward to embrace him, grabbing his neck and the two of us rolling on the grass. Brother Wolf sniffed my face and neck while I hugged his neck, my nose all wet and my eyes all teary.

I fussed with Brother Wolf for some time before we calmed down. Brother Wolf howled towards the forest and a snow white female wolf and a silver and white baby wolf slowly walked out to greet me. I laughed and went to embrace the baby wolf, turning happily to Huo Qu Bing "I have a little niece. She's the real princess of the wolves. Isn't she beautiful?"

Huo Qu Bing smiled and walked forward, but Snow Lady warily eyed him and gave a warning howl. I shot Huo Qu Bing a pleased expression "She doesn't like you, they don't think you're a nice person!" Huo Qu Bing had no choice but to halt.

Little Princess has a small face and spiky hair, like a snowball she rolls all over me. Brother Wolf used his tail to play with her and Little Princess was non stop leaping and jumping, occasionally returning to my embrace. She would bare her teeth and stick her tongue out at her father. I

can't control my laughter, and the sound of human laughter and wolf happiness sounds through the hillside. Huo Qu Bing stands off to the side and watches us, with an expression of worry mixed with self-blame.

The sound of horses at the base of the mountain indicates that the troops have arrived. Huo Qu Bing looked towards the foot of the mountain and then looked at me "Yu Er." I looked at him and he stared directly into my eyes for some time "I have to head back. You.....you guys have reunited after much time apart, so you should just stay with them for the time being!" I looked at him disbelievingly but he smiled warmly "Just don't leave Qi Lian Mountain anytime soon, okay?" All the longing in his eyes almost obscured his smile that was wishing for me to be happy.

I solemnly nodded my head and he looked towards Brother Wolf "I'll leave Yu Er in your hands for now" and then not even waiting to see whether Brother Wolf understood what he said, it was like he was treating Brother Wolf as an elder brother and he gave Brother Wolf a respectful bow before turning and quickly running down the mountain.

.....

Little Princess follows behind me and Brother Wolf and awkwardly tries to play in the water. Our queen Snow Lady rests on a big rock and gazes gently down at us. I kick Brother Wolf, wondering how he managed to hoodwink such a beautiful wolf to be his bride. Brother Wolf howled and then his claws came towards my face, and I immediately chopped him on the neck. Snow Lady stood up in shock, but after watching us fighting as usual, finally quietly sat back down.

Poor Little Princess was sprayed by the water we splashed, causing her to choke and start sinking in the water. I stopped fooling around with Brother Wolf and pulled her up, and Brother Wolf halted his claw which was about to strike me. Little Princess, with her round baby eyes, was giving me the most pitiful look, with her four paws helplessly swatting the air. She gave a pitiful whimper, causing me to laugh and kiss her nose before dragging her back to shore.

Snow Lady immediately came to lick the water drops off Little Princess, who nestled next to her mother with her stomach in the air. She used her paws to swat her mother's face and made happy noises, which made me happy to watch.

Brother Wolf came on shore and was ready to shake his fur. I gave him a warning glare, but he insisted on following me to shake. The water sprayed outward and landed on me, and I kicked him again. I start a fire to dry my clothes, but Brother Wolf doesn't rests next to me like usual. Because Snow Lady is not used to the fire, he keeps her company a distance away. They occasionally give each other head rubs or lick each other's fur.

Watching them, I know that Brother Wolf will never accompany me the same way again. He will be Snow Lady's partner from now on, and I am all alone to sit by the fire.

As my thoughts swirled around, somehow two days have passed. How are Huo Qu Bing and those folks? Suddenly there came the sound of a howl from the forest and I howled back. A lot of people are fighting? I sat there in silence for some time. There are no absolute victories on the battlefield, not even Huo Qu Bing. I suddenly get up and dress myself. Brother Wolf gave me a quizzical look. I take the roasted meat off the spit and hand it to him. It's still rare but he shouldn't mind.

"I have to leave for a bit" and I stroked his head. He howled in protest but I could only apologetically slap him on the back before turning to leave. He got up to accompany me but I stopped him. I didn't want him involved in our human battles.

Brother Wolf howled in frustration. Snow Lady gave a few low growls and Brother Wolf immediately calmed down. A well-forged steel nevertheless can't withstand a gentle force. I laugh at Brother Wolf and then quickly leave before he gets mad. Looking back I see three wolves in the moonlight, their shadows intertwining. I smile but my heart hurts. Brother Wolf has his own family now, and all I have are a heart full of memories I don't want to remember.

I traveled all night and it was almost dawn by the time I reached the battlefield. I hid on a tree and looked into the distance. After battling for a day and a night, the battle is nearing the end. The ground is littered with corpses and the trees and grass have all been stained red. The sound of steel striking steel reverberates in the air, giving what was a warm sunny morning a chilly aura.

I jump off the tree and traverse through the corpses. How many of these dead are Li Chengs of the Han dynasty, and how many are Li Chengs of the Xiong Nu. And all these dead bodies, how many more Li Chengs will be created because of this. Will more people put on armor to avenge the death of their fathers and brothers? How many dead bodies are there? Are there forty to fifty thousand people laying silently here? I ought to have been prepared to walk into this living hell, but my heart still shuddered. I walked for a long time but there was only an unending sea of dead bodies. The bottom of my robe was long soaked through the blood. Everywhere I look there remains just dead bodies and blood.

From the clothing, it looks like the Xiong Nu have suffered a great defeat, with the Xiong Nu dead greatly outnumbering the Han dead. A few lingering Xiong Nu soldiers see me and quickly grab their weapons. I send my gold ball flying and knock away their weapons. I walk right past them and a young man grabs his dagger and rushes me. I give him a cold look and speak in Xiong Nu “Hurry up and leave. Run as fast as you can. Your mother is at home waiting for you.” They halted and looked wary, but ultimately decided to leave.

The Summer sun was shining on the Qi Lian Mountains, turning the trees extra green. In the verdant mountain greenery, Huo Qu Bing, wearing a black robe with a silver armor, holding a broad sword in his hand, standing straight and tall, was surveying the battlefield from a high vantage point.

The silver armor and the reflection from his broad sword is so glittering that one can't look directly at him. Mixed with the blood scented breeze, his robe and his hair, which is free of his circlet, billows in the wind. On the ground is the ugly truth of blood stained dead bodies, but up high there are green trees and red flowers under the warm sun. The contrast

is vivid, especially because he is standing there. These two seemingly contrasting images somehow meld together because of him, giving off a heart shaking type of astonishing visual clarity. The warrior gods of the legend could not possibly be more breathtaking than he is.

He's fine, so I let out a pent up breath. I turn to leave "Yu.....Er....." a loud and joyful cry reverberates in the mountains, shattering the chilly aura in the air. I turn around and he is quickly traversing the trees and the flowers, his hair flying in the wind "You came here to look for me? You were worried about me?" I checked him out "What happened to your hair?"

He laughed "The circlet accidentally got shot off by an arrow." I point to the battlefield "Did the Xiong Nu suffer a defeat?"

He smiled and nodded his head "Not just a defeat, a complete and utter defeat. I captured one tribal leader and five small tribal heads. We had less men but they lost almost all their soldiers and we only lost a third of ours."

Zhao Puo Nu came up and bowed "General, sir! We have counted the Xiong Nu dead, a total of thirty thousand two hundred men." Huo Qu Bing nodded and Zhao Puo Nu continued "The Xiong Nu will have no ability to amass more forces here at the Qi Lian Mountains, so tonight we can rest. The General can admire the beauty of this mountain vista so prized by the Xiong Nu." Huo Qu Bing looked at me and then waved Zhao Puo Nu off.

"How come you don't look the least bit happy?" Huo Qu Bing asked me. "This battle is for the Emperor to win more territory and expand his empire and open more roads to Xi Yu. What does it have to do with me? Perhaps this battle avenged Li Cheng's death, but then this type of vengeance will never end." He raised his eyebrow "It's rare to meet a Han person who doesn't hate the Xiong Nu." I change the subject and point to his head "Go bathe and change! I also need to change."

He smiled and tried to grab my hand but I brushed him away "Right now you might not be able to beat me in a fight, so just behave yourself."

He kept smiling behind me “We’ve been more intimate than holding hands, so what’s the reticence with hand holding all of a sudden?”

I glared at him and he quickly retracted his hand with a smile “Fine, but at least you’re more spirited now than a minute ago.” I startle for a moment before realizing I fell into his trap again. I shake my head and silently walk away, and he also quietly walks beside me. We gradually leave the battlefield behind and the smell of flowers permeates the air. My emotions have calmed down considerably.

As we walk through the wooded forest, our shadows are overlapping. I suddenly remember how the shadows of Brother Wolf’s family overlapped under the moonlight.

A fire is blazing in the mountain side, everyone is happy and celebrating, the wine is flowing. Only Huo Qu Bing and I sit around our fire, but soldiers would come toast him before swiftly departing. Huo Qu Bing handed me a flask of wine. I’m about to decline when I smell it and immediately ask “Is this horse wine?” He nods “The spoils of today’s battle. Our wine can’t even compare with this taste.” I take it and gingerly take a sip, the taste bringing back memories.

Huo Qu Bing takes a few sips and then hands it back to me, but I shake my head. He smiles, which is when Zhao Puo Nu arrives with two bowls to toast us. Huo Qu Bing laughingly yelled at him “Are you trying to get me drunk? You toasted already so why are you back?”

Zhao Puo Nu handed a bowl to me “This wine is not for the General, it’s for Brother Jin. I want to apologize for earlier. I have never seen pigeons who dare to battle a falcon, and I never knew your pigeons would be so brave. I could never replace those pigeons of yours, and I ask you to please forgive my ignorance and insensitivity earlier.” I can see the regret in his eyes. I didn’t say anything or accept the wine, so his smile freezes “If you do not accept my apology, I understand.” and he downs his bowl of wine and bows to me before turning to leave. I grab the remaining bowl from his hand and down it in one gulp with my eyes closed, causing me to choke a little.

Huo Qu Bing smiled at Zhao Puo Nu “That was quite a response, with such bad alcohol tolerance and gulping that bowl down. Normally this one doesn’t drink much.” Zhao Puo Nu smiled and bowed to us before leaving.

I sat for awhile and then my head started to spin. I stand up “I should go back before the alcohol hits my head.” He also stood up and grabbed the flask “Let’s go together.”

Huo Qu Bing’s tent is set up at the back of the mountains. Because of consideration for me, he ordered other tents to be set up some distance away. Before I arrive at the tent my body is already starting to grow weak. Huo Qu Bing assisted me but I shook off his hand. But I was barely standing so he ignored my struggling and picked me up and brought me inside the tent.

In the darkness, my mind suddenly feels especially clear. The past comes flooding back in moments of clarity and then confusion. I can’t control what I’m thinking, and the things I rather not think about keep coming back the clearest, causing my heart to hurt.

Huo Qu Bing lit the lamp and then sat down next to me, giving me a look. He sighed and took out a handkerchief to wipe my tears “Are you still sad because of Xiao Tao, Xiao Qian, and Li Cheng?” I grab his sleeve and keep sobbing “My Papa is gone, Jiu Ye doesn’t want me, Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao are gone, and even Brother Wolf has his own wife and daughter. I’m all alone now.”

Huo Qu Bing’s hand froze and he took a drink from the flask before continuing to wipe my tears “Nonsense! What do you mean you’re all alone? I’ll be by your side.”

My nose was running and I grabbed his sleeve to blow my nose “Why are you so good to me and spend all this effort on me?”

He stared at his own sleeve and shook his head with resignation. He jerked my hand away and shoved the handkerchief in my hand before

taking off his outer robe. "Are you really that stupid or just pretending to be stupid? I may have never explicitly said it, but can't you see that I want to marry you?"

I grab for the flask but he keeps it out of my reach "You're not drinking anymore" and then he took another swig.

I reach for it again and he grabbed my hand "Answer me this, and I'll let you drink. Do you like me even a little bit?" His piercing eyes stared at me, and I cocked my head to one side, thinking before answering "I don't know."

Huo Qu Bing let out a long sigh "Then in the past, did you ever feel sad when you saw me hurting? Did you worry about me today?"

I nodded my head vigorously "Even today I refuse to look at an acacia flower. The moment I see it my heart hurts. I was so afraid you would be injured by the Xiong Nu that I rushed all night to get to you."

He gave a sad smile "Then I am in your heart" and he continued to drink "That day at the Yue Ya Spring, you had walked away, but why did you turn back? When you turned back to look at me, did you know your face was all red? Why was your face red? If your heart didn't want to see me, why did you save a viewing room at the Luo Yu House for me? When you're not happy, I will always try to make you laugh. But when I'm unhappy, you always try to change the subject. When I was stewing over the criticism of those scholars like Xi Ma Qian that day, normally you don't like to tussle with me, but that day you grabbed my sleeve and kept chattering. I knew you were trying to make me laugh. Awhile ago, you were cooking up ideas because I had kept you here, but the moment I mentioned my father, you immediately changed the subject and kept nattering about random topics. Yu Er, I was only wrong once, late once. If in Chang An....."

I laughed and pointed at his face "You're getting drunk. You're face is so red, like a monkey's bottom." He smiled and shook his head "You're the one who is drunk. Otherwise how can you cry one moment and then laugh

another moment.”

I shook my head and then splayed open my hands “I’m not drunk, I’m completely lucid.”

I stared at the flask in his hand “I want to drink, I haven’t drank horse wine in a long time. I snuck some as a kid and it tasted terrible.” He took another drink “Now you don’t think it tastes terrible anymore?” I make a weepy face “It still tastes terrible, but the taste reminds me of Papa.”

He handed me the flask and I took a big drink. He finished up the rest and then tossed the flask aside. “Yu Er, don’t return to the wolf pack. Marry me!” Huo Qu Bing laid down on the carpet and gave me a drunken twinkling smile. I giggle back at him but don’t answer. He continued “Meng Jiu is indeed not bad. Like a willow tree, with a calm smile like the moonlight. He is indeed one of those rare young men in this world. But I’m not bad either. And I will always be good to you. So just forget him!”

Before I can answer, he started laughing “I am drunk. If I wasn’t drunk, I couldn’t possibly have spoken aloud what I just said, even if that is what I believe in my heart.”

I furrowed my brows. The warm shadow under the lamplight, that gentle calm shadow, the kind and caring shadow..... Huo Qu Bing’s face was suddenly in front of my eyes “Right now I’m the person in front of you, don’t think about someone else.”

I stare at him and start to cry. Huo Qu Bing wipes my tears away and his hand caresses my face. He hesitated when he touched my lips, his hand turning burning. He stiffened and I just stared at him. He suddenly took a deep breath and kissed me. My heart both knew what was happening and didn’t know what was happening. My body became light and soft, like I was about to float away, or suddenly fall to earth. Only his lips, his hand, his body, it was like a burning flame. My heart was so cold, and I wanted this heat.....

.....

I vaguely heard the sound of wolf howling and it woke me up. My head hurts and my body feels weak. I struggle to open my eyes, but when I see that I am entwined intimately with Huo Qu Bing, I immediately shut my eyes. In shock, what happened yesterday night came flooding back. I'm too afraid to move and my mind is muddy. Another wolf howl sounded, so I closed my eyes and softly slid out of Huo Qu Bing's embrace. I turn my back to him and hurry up and get dressed.

There is a flickering candle but I can't face such a bright room so I blow it out. I stand in the darkness, while behind me Huo Qu Bing turns over. I startled and then quickly run out of the tent. I can see the soldiers doing their rounds so I dart into the forest and run towards the direction of the howling.

A crescent moon hangs in the sky, shining down on a small lake in the forest. Brother Wolf is resting on a big rock next to the lake, howling into the sky. Snow Lady howls with him. Little Princess sees me and immediately jumps forward, but she stops herself when she reaches me. She makes whimpering sounds and hesitates. I bit my lip before picking her up "My smell changed?" I walked over to Brother Wolf and he suspiciously sniffed me and howled a few times. I ignored him so he just flopped back down.

My smell changed? Because I'm no longer a girl anymore, I'm a woman now. I splash my face with the cold water, wanting it to wake myself up. But what can I do after I am awake? I stare at the lake surface, with a thousand thoughts I can't make sense of.

Little Princess started squirming in my arms but I don't play with her like usual. She gets impatient and then jumps out of my arms to go bite her dad's tail. Snow Lady suddenly jerks in the direction of the forest and gives a warning growl. I turn to look towards that direction but don't see anything. I knew there was something in the distance that alarmed Snow Lady, yet Brother Wolf remained nonchalantly playing with Little Princess. He gave a low growl to Snow Lady, causing my body to freeze. Once

Snow Lady heard Brother Wolf's growl, she relaxed her attack stance, but remained cautiously protecting Little Princess.

A short while later, I heard someone softly walk up behind me. With worry and hesitation "Yu....Yu Er, I.....I....." his voice trailed off. The surroundings turned silent again. One forward, one back, neither of us moving. Little Princess stopping goofing around and turned to give us a quizzical look. Brother Wolf got impatient and let out a long howl. He swatted me with his paw and then yelped at Huo Qu Bing before taking Snow Lady and Little Princess away with him.

Huo Qu Bing walked closer behind me "I'm.....I'm sorry. I....I....."

A man like him actually has a moment when he is so nervous he can't get a full sentence out. I hug my knees and look out over the lake "There is nothing to be sorry for. If we did something wrong, we are both equally to blame. It's not like you forced me." My voice was calm but my heart was churning.

Huo Qu Bing walked a few steps away and then sat down on another rock. He stared out on the lake and we sat there in silence for some time. He picked up a rock next to his foot and tossed it into the lake, happening to hit the reflection of the moon on the lake. The moon shatters. He suddenly stood up and walked back to me. He grabbed my shoulders and made me look at him. With an unwavering look "Yu Er, marry me."

My heart was a mess and I don't dare look at him, so I avert my eyes and look at the opposite side of the lake. I discovered Brother Wolf and Snow Lady were sitting side by side intently looking at us. Little Princess mimicked her parents and was sitting on the ground with her head cocked, staring at me with her bright eyes. In all my confusion I started to laugh. I picked up a rock and threw it towards Brother Wolf "See something interesting?"

Brother Wolf didn't move or blink as the rock landed right next to him, but it frightened Little Princess who yelped and climbed on her father's back. Even though Brother Wolf couldn't talk, I can see the worry

in his eyes, and his hope and encouragement. It was a look that revealed how much he wanted me to find happiness. It was the same look Papa gave me when we parted that final time.

I looked into Brother Wolf's eyes and smiled "Yes."

Huo Qu Bing grabbed my arms "You said yes? Was that yes directed at me?" I looked around and laughed "Is there anyone else here? If so then I might need to reconsider?" Huo Qu Bing stared at me, and then he let out a joyful holler before picking me up from the rock. He was hugging me and Brother Wolf let out a long howl towards the sky. Little Princess mimicked her father and let out a teeny baby howl towards the sky.

In that moment, the sound of happiness sounded through the forest. I looked at the slowly disappearing moon. Right now, is that same moon shining on that person still in Chang An? I looked at Huo Qu Bing and I could see the unfettered joy in his eyes. I stared at him and my heart started to twinge. I smiled and reached out to hug him, resting my head on his shoulder. Huo Qu Bing quietly embraced me, and then he shook me slightly "Can you say it again? Did you really agree?"

My heart was filled with both happiness and a touch of aching for him "Jin Yu is willing to marry Huo Qu Bing." He loudly laughed "This is the best thing I have ever heard in my entire life. Can you say it again?" I punched his shoulder "Not saying it again."

He lowered his forehead and rested it against mine, his mouth still smiling broadly, looking at me with eyes that shine brighter than the stars. He softly pleaded "Say it one more time. Just one more time."

I stared at him even as my lips consented to his request "I am willing to marry you." Huo Qu Bing kissed me on the cheek "My wonderful wifey."

I stood there stunned, so immediately his smile froze and he looked at me with hesitation. "My wonderful wifey", those three words tumbled through my mind. Only now do I really understand that my role in life is

about to change. My face started burning up and I couldn't help myself but smile. Huo Qu Bing understood what I was thinking and his worry went away. He stared at me with the most tender of expressions, without saying a word, continuing to embrace me tightly.

The Eastern sky is starting to turn bright, and in the forest all the birds are beginning to sing. The darkness is ending, and a new day is beginning, just like my life.

Chapter 21: First Kiss

Huo Qu Bing and I walked ahead, while Brother Wolf and Snow Lady followed behind me. Little Princess would sometimes run ahead to chase a butterfly, run next to me to make me carry her, or mimic her parents and walk leisurely besides us.

After spending more than two days together, Snow Lady has lowered her caution towards Huo Qu Bing and doesn't stop him from getting close to Little Princess as long as I'm around. "If we continue down this road, we will be headed towards the chief Xiong Nu tribe's territory. Even though they have lost many battles, but there are likely troops nearby and it might be hard to avoid running into them." Huo Qu Bing smiled and reminded me.

I replied "I know. The Xiong Nu live along the water ways, and the Qi Lian Mountains are the Xiong Nu's most beautiful and fertile lands. The Xiong Nu army might have been defeated, but the nomadic Xiong Nu herders who live here are likely loathe to depart. Even if we don't run into the army, we'll likely run into some herders." He asked quizzically "You said we were going to see someone. Is it a Xiong Nu person?"

I glanced at him "What if it is a Xiong Nu person?" He confidently laughed "Yu Er, smile. This whole way your expression has gotten more and more somber. Who cares if it is a Xiong Nu person. Even if it is the Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu, I will gladly go with you to meet him."

He looked at my outfit "But I don't think it is a Xiong Nu person. Of the outfits I got you, there was a Han outfit, and various Xi Yu outfits, and even a Xiong Nu outfit. You chose a Gui Su outfit, and the Xiong Nu outfit was the first outfit you tossed aside, with a look of disgust."

I lightly sighed "I ought to be wearing a Han outfit, but the Gui Su outfit comes with a face veil." I checked him out "But it's enough that you're wearing it."

Over one mountain and another, we traverse the dense woods. Brother Wolf has already realized where I am headed and he impatiently followed behind me and then rushed forward. He came back after some time and lowly growled to me. I immediately stop walking. Huo Qu Bing asked “What? Someone is ahead?” I nodded, hesitating for a moment before walking forward. Both the humans and the wolves silenced our footsteps.

Huo Qu Bing and I crouched down and moved behind the heavy brush. When I saw a figure in front of the gravestone, I immediately froze. Huo Qu Bing also stopped and peered out between the brush. There was one large gravestone and one small gravestone. A man was quietly sitting in front of the gravestone drinking alone. Behind him stood two guards a respectful distance away. Huo Qu Bing recognized the person sitting in front of the grave and turned to give me a questioning look. I only silently stared at Yi Zhi Xie sitting in front of the grave.

In the growth of the mountain side came the sound of insects buzzing. Bits of sunlight shone down on the grave through the tree tops and on Yi Zhi Xie, giving off a sense of isolation. He faced the grave and was quietly drinking. His shadow reflected his melancholy, with every raised cup he seemed to be drinking in his sorrow.

Yi Zhi Xie used his hands to fix the weeds around the grave. His two guards immediately stepped forward to do it but he silently waved them away. The two looked at each other and then retreated. My hand was unconsciously gripping the branch next to me, tighter and tighter. By the time Huo Qu Bing realized it and removed my hand from the branch, it was already covered in blood. Yi Zhi Xie cleaned both graves and then he poured a glass for the large grave and toasted it.

“Brother Xu, you ought to be happy today. Half of Qi Lian Mountains has already been stolen by the Han dynasty. Perhaps soon you will be resting here under Han owned earth. I hope you don’t mind drinking with me. You told me before that the nomadic tribes, compared to the agricultural communities, will always be at a disadvantage. In the short term, the nomadic tribes can use fast speed to conquer the agricultural cultures. But if the nomadic tribes don’t quickly adapt to an agricultural basis, the citizenry and the wealth will always not measure up. In the long

run, it will lose to the agricultural communities. I asked you then, what if we adopted the agricultural way of life, and you said then we could potentially rule successfully. But then after a few generations, our nomadic culture and identity would disappear, and over time the nomadic descendants would become the minority and subject to discrimination. At that time I refused to accept this. Our Xiong Nu braves have lived like this for generations, and as long as we had warriors, we would never disappear that easily. But now I finally understand what you were trying to say. Things are happening now like you predicted. After a period of growth, the Han dynasty is rich and powerful. Compared to the Xiong Nu, we cannot match up in man power or wealth.”

Yi Zhi Xie poured another cup for Papa “In the past there was Wei Qing, and now there is a Huo Qu Bing. There isn’t a single commanding general in the Xiong Nu army. Our most revered riding forces were defeated by Huo Qu Bing. A General born in an agricultural community actually is a faster and more vicious than our soldiers who were born and bred on a horse. Because of him, the Han dynasty has changed from the defensive stance it kept during the General Wei Qing generation into one where they are on the offensive.”

He gulped his wine and sighed “These are just some worries, but what worries me the most is that all the armies are united under the Han Emperor, but all our armies are splintered into different tribes. On the surface all the leaders of the tribes bow to the Shan Yu, but they each have their own calculations. With one Huo Qu Bing, each tribal leader is afraid their troops will be sacrificed on the front line, hoping some other tribe will be deployed first. But all the waiting for others to fight their battles, we are just waiting for our own demise. On this alone we have already lost to the Han dynasty. But I will not give up, and I cannot give up. If I could have been born ten years earlier, before Liu Che ascended the throne and fixed our internal political structure, then today……. But the Heavens appears to not want to give the Xiong Nu anymore time. The Heavens appear to favor the Han……”

I shot Huo Qu Bing a look. So he has become the most deadly and fearful enemy in the eyes of the Xiong Nu. Huo Qu Bing looked at my demeanor and asked if I understood what he was saying. I nodded my head.

Yi Zhi Xie's hand brushed over the small grave and rested there. He appeared to be deep in thought. After a long time, his hand remained on the grave.

Looking at his expression, I felt a sense of confusion. He shouldn't be the one who sent someone to kill me. He doesn't appear to suspect that I'm not dead. But.....I stopped. None of this was important, and I don't want to waste any time thinking about it. He sat for some more time before finally getting up wordlessly and leaving with his retainers. I crouched for awhile longer before walking out of the woods and kneeling before the grave. "Papa, I brought someone to meet you."

I looked at Huo Qu Bing and he immediately kneeled and bowed his head to the ground "Sir, I am Huo Qu Bing, and I am going to marry your daughter." I initially had tears in my eyes, but when I heard his words, I laughed through my tears "How can you be so impatient? What if my Papa doesn't like you?"

He smiled and looked over the tombstone "Was your father a Xiong Nu?" I shook my head "A Han." He looked at the smaller grave and asked "Your sibling?"

Even though Yi Zhi Xie cleaned Papa's grave, I still took out a cloth and thoroughly wiped it. Huo Qu Bing took the cloth from my hands "Let me clean it! If your Papa saw the wounds on your hands, he'll blame me. If he gets angry, he might not marry you to me. That would be terrible."

Huo Qu Bing finished wiping the grave and was about to wipe down the small grave when I stopped him "That one doesn't need to be cleaned." He looked confused but didn't ask further. I was quiet for a moment "That is my grave."

Huo Qu Bing stopped for a moment and then he understood everything "No wonder you were so frightened to see him in Chang An. You don't want him to know you're alive." I nodded.

Brother Wolf circled the grave a few times before getting bored and running into the forest with Snow Lady and Little Princess. I sit on the ground “You conquered this Qi Lian Mountains, letting Papa rest on Han soil. Papa will surely like you.” Huo Qu Bing was a bit taken aback but smiled and bow three more times to Papa “Thank you for the praise, father-in-law.”

I was embarrassed and frustrated “How can there be someone like you, changing references so quickly and calling him father-in-law? My Papa was a carefree man but he was a stickler for etiquette.” Huo Qu Bing raised his eyebrow “You’re not very much like your Papa.”

I laughed and nodded “Yes, Papa said I am a wild one. I can’t endure those stupid rules created by people. Even now, if Papa saw me I would look like a upstanding person, and I can follow rules if I must, but really.....” Huo Qu Bing laughed and finished for me “You’re a wolf-hearted dog-livered person.”

I humphed at him “Thank you for the compliment. When I was small I thought people should use wolf-hearted and dog-livered as a compliment. Wolves and dogs are very loyal animals, and quite smart. I don’t understand why the Han use this as an insult.” Huo Qu Bing raised his head and starting laughing, which made my heart ache a bit “Many years ago when I said the same thing to Papa, he also laughed heartily like that.”

The sun is setting and the waning light shines on Papa’s grave, giving it a warm red aura. Huo Qu Bing stays by my side this whole time. Whatever I’m willing to say, he listens. Whatever I’m not willing to say, he doesn’t ask. Whenever I feel sadness rising, with just a few teasing words from him getting me all angry and laughing, he brushes it all away. I squint and look at the setting sun and think “Papa, you can finally rest your heart. With this person beside me, I won’t even have time to cry.”

Thinking of Yi Zhi Xie’s lonely figure before the grave, and looking at Huo Qu Bing gazing at me with eyes full of affection and care, I feel so many emotions inside. As our eyes met, he suddenly snapped his fingers and said angrily “If you keep looking at me like that, I will.....” before I

can avoid him he's already kissed me on the cheek ".....take advantage of the moment."

I angrily hit him and he laughs "Father-in-law, do you see how mean and bad-tempered Yu Er is?"

At that very moment, I finally let it all go. I let go of the past, let go of my hate towards Yi Zhi Xie. Papa, your daughter finally understands now what you have been teaching me. Only when you let it all go and walk forward can you find happiness.

.....

Even though the Xiong Nu suffered a great defeat, the ordinary people continue on with their lives. The cows and the sheep continue to roam under the blue skies, the market places are still buzzing with activity. The Han, the Xiong Nu, and the various Xi Yu people are all gathered together to do business. A blind Xiong Nu man sits in the corner and plays a horse lute, singing a mournful song. Some listening to it looks despondent, while others are smiling, and some just sigh and throw down a few coins before hurrying away.

Huo Qu Bing tossed a silver bullion which caused everyone to look at me. I quickly pulled him away and he asked me in a low voice "What was that man singing about?" I gave him a side long look "You." He laughed "Me? Too bad I don't understand Xiong Nu."

I hum the tune and translate the lyrics "Loss of our Yen Zhi Mountains, causing our wives to lose all color; destroy our Qi Lian Mountains, causing our animals to have no shelter." The song was simple but the words so true yet sad that even my singing is tinged with sadness. As we walked away, we see other people drinking and singing the blind man's song. Huo Qu Bing glanced at the people singing "Now I know why you're not happy even though we won the battle."

I answered "I've never been interested in warfare nor would it make

me happy. I'm not a pacifist, and when a battle is necessary I won't hesitate. But the death and destruction in war still makes me afraid. When I was small I grew up in the Xiong Nu, but that doesn't make me a Xiong Nu person." He let out a sigh of relief "That's good. When I heard you singing, I was a little worried about you."

We entered a Han restaurant and the waiter asked if we wanted some wine. Huo Qu Bing stared at me while my face turned red, and he was awkward as well and declined, asking for just something to eat. He asked as we sat down "After we're done strolling through here, anywhere else you want to go?" I shook my head "No. Either this place is different than when I was a kid, or I've changed in the way I see things." He smiled "I think your feelings have changed. After dining let's hurry back to base then."

A drunken Xiong Nu man sprawled on the table and kept singing the blind man song and crying. Huo Qu Bing sighed "Why is it everywhere we go we hear this song?"

I pretend to make a startled expression and then tease him "Wow, this is even better than the literature and poems composed by the scholars. Looks like the Great General Huo's name will spread along with this song. Who knows if this song will be passed on for thousands of years, so that when people in the future hear this song, they can imagined the Great General Huo's power and valor. It will surely make them gape to witness such magnificence!" and I pointed to his forehead.

He lightly smiled and whispered in my ear "All I want is for you to gape at me." Before I can tease him, he's already teased me back. I breath in his smell and it makes my ears turn red. I quickly lower my eyes and focused on eating, avoiding looking at him.

The table next to us overheard me mention Huo Qu Bing and smiled at me and then toasted each other "This year is the year we Han people emerge victorious. In the Spring, General Huo used just ten thousand troops to capture Yen Zhi Mountain, and in the Summer he vanquished tens of thousands of Xiong Nu warriors to take Qi Lian Mountains." The other

person sitting at the same table smirked at the drunk Xiong Nu “When I came here to do business as a child with my father, those barbarians were arrogant and condescending to us Han people for being weak. We needed to send them princesses to keep them placated. Now look who is afraid to fight whom.”

Too bad the Xiong Nu man actually understood the Han language and got up in a rage, pointing to the two men “If you are a real Han man, then put your money where your mouth is. Let’s go outside and fight. If you win, I’ll give you my head and you can take it back to the Han dynasty to show off.”

The Xiong Nu are proud people who treat death lightly, so this man meant it. The two Han men gritted their teeth and accepted the challenge. I was just enjoying this showdown when Huo Qu Bing grabbed my hand and used his eyes to gesture outside. I looked out the window and startled for a moment before fixing my veil. The drunken Xiong Nu walked outside and ran into a band of Xiong Nu just walking by the store and said to them “Brothers on the plains, I am Hei Shi To and I am about to fight two men who insulted the Xiong Nu. The Hans don’t keep their promises so can you be my witness?”

Before Yi Zhi Xie can say anything, Mu Da Duo coldly huffed “Of course we can. Make sure they lose their heads.” The news has spread and more people have gathered. The two Hans are starting to look scared and shoot pleading looks at the owner, who cannot help them because he needs to do business here.

Huo Qu Bing asked in a low voice “What did they just say?” I replied “Those two Hans will likely not survive. This is annoying. If they want to fight, then hurry up and fight and stop blocking this place.” Huo Qu Bing laughed “If it wasn’t running into someone you’re afraid to see, you’d be the first to get in line to watch the showdown.” I huffed at him “I’ve already let that emotional burden go. I’m not afraid to see him anymore. But I don’t want to incur any trouble, so one less complication is better than one more.”

From the street another Xiong Yu yelled out that since there were two Hans, they will send out another Xiong Yu to even the competition. The man who agreed to fight Hei Shi To was calm, but his companion was trembling with fear. The crowd laughed at him, and even Huo Qu Bing shot them an icy look.

One man introduced himself to Huo Qu Bing as Yu Xun and his companion as Chen Li, they are from Long Xi. If they lose this competition, they want to ask Huo Qu Bing as a fellow Han to send word to their families. Huo Qu Bing stared at the quaking Chen Li and noted that Long Xi is known for birthing great warriors of past and present generations, so it's quite odd to see someone not fit the mold. Yu Xun looked at Chen Li with embarrassment, when suddenly Chen Li pointed to me and shouted "Her! She insulted the Xiong Nu, she said it first. She complimented Huo Qu Bing. I merely added a few words."

Even with my back to the public, I can feel a hundred eyes suddenly trained on me. Because I was a girl, they turned their rage to Huo Qu Bing. Mu Da Duo suddenly gave a small gasp and quickly said "My lord, we should get going! There are too many people here, we shouldn't linger."

Before she finished talking, Yi Zhi Xie was walking into the store and smiled at Huo Qu Bing "What a small world."

Huo Qu Bing sat there without moving, not responding to Yi Zhi Xie's greeting. Yi Zhi Xie's guard rushed forward and angrily said "Meeting the young master in Chang An, I was already itching (for a fight). I am Tie Niu Mu, and I've got a bit of brawn and want to compete with the young master." Huo Qu Bing continued to sit there without moving, ignoring them and only looking at me.

"Hahaha, the Hans are all like that. All talk and no guts." The people outside started to snicker and someone sarcastically said "When he was talking about others, he seemed like a real man, turns out he's just a pile of dirt."

I softly sighed. If we can't avoid it, might as well face it head on. I

smiled at Huo Qu Bing “Don’t worry about me, just do what you want!”

Huo Qu Bing nodded and stood up to face Tie Niu Mu “Competing with you won’t be fair. Have the best rider and archer in the Xiong Nu come compete with me. If I lose, you can have my head. If you lose, from now on, in this town, the Xiong Nu can never be insulting to the Hans. I hear the Xiong Nu believe in keeping their word. I won’t worry about any promises not being fulfilled.”

Since Tie Niu Mu is Yi Zhi Xie’s personal guard, he must be one of the best warriors in the Xiong Mu. But for Huo Qu Bing to deem him not worthy to compete, he was so enraged that his face was turning blue. Just as he was about to say something, Yi Zhi Xie shot him a look. He could only clench his fist and shoot deathly glares at Huo Qu Bing, but said nothing.

A few hundred people are gathered outside the restaurant chattering like magpies. But faced with Huo Qu Bing’s confident aura, everyone grew quiet. A second later, the Hans started cheering and straightened their spines, shooting proud looks at the Xiong Nu.

A few Xiong Nu and Xi Yu people who didn’t understand the Han language asked around and got an explanation of what was said. They looked at Huo Qu Bing with newfound admiration. Initially the Xiong Nu were each trying to be the one to compete, but now they looked at each other, unsure who had the ability to fight against him.

Hei Shi To yelled out “This lady may have complimented General Huo but she did not insult the Xiong Nu. General Huo is indeed powerful on horseback against us, and I have no choice but to admit he’s a real man’s man. If anyone wants to fight this young master, go ahead. But I’m still going to fight the other two guys and make them take back what they said.”

Huo Qu Bing bowed to Hei Shi To “if I lose, then those two will naturally apologize to you.” Chen Li quickly added “If he loses, then we will surely apologize.” Yu Shun looked at Huo Qu Bing and then me,

before saying to Hei Shi To “If he loses, then my head will be my apology.”

The crowd gasped and Hei Shi To tempered his arrogance “Good man, I take back what I said earlier that the Hans can only talk but not act.”

There are more and more Xiong Nu gathered but no one continued to shoot derisive looks at the Hans. Everyone whispered as to who would compete. Tie Niu Mu was angry and impatient, the veins in his hand popping. But one look at Yi Zhi Xie’s face and he quietly stood still.

When Yi Zhi Xie last saw me, I was but 12 or 13 years old. Now I am full grown, my height and figure have greatly changed. Plus I’m wearing a veil and with my side profile to him. Yi Zhi Xie glanced over me before fixing his attention on Huo Qu Bing. His one glance over me caused Mu Da Duo’s face to whiten. She purposely refused to look at me, though she couldn’t help but sneak a peek, looking very torn.

Huo Qu Bing barely acknowledges everyone’s eyes on him. He calmly sits down and sips his tea, smiling at me “What if I lose my head?” I smiled back “Then I’ll just have to follow you down into the ground.” Huo Qu Bing froze for a second, and without a care as to what other’s might think, he tightly grasped my hand. I grabbed his hand back, the two of us just smiling and staring at each other.

The people outside are starting to get loud about who will compete when Yi Zhi Xie suddenly spoke up calmly and quietly “Will the young master consent to compete with me?” His voice isn’t very loud, but suddenly all the arguing outside stopped. A thousand eyes turned to look at him. Seeing his aura, everyone stopped trying to argue for someone else.

All of Yi Zhi Xie’s guards knelt down and tried to plead with him. Tie Niu Mu begged “My lord, he is not worthy of you personally doing this. Any one of us will be fine. If you don’t think I can do it, then let Zhen Tai go, I won’t fight for this opportunity with him.”

Mu Da Duo was staring at my hands entwined with Huo Qu Bing, her face a mixture of happiness and worry. When she heard what Yi Zhi Xie said, she gasped, seemingly wanting to plead with him but finally not saying anything.

Huo Qu Bing felt my hand stiffen, and he ignored Yi Zhi Xie's question and quickly looked at me. Yi Zhi Xie's riding and archery skills are the best of the best in the Xiong Nu. I thought he might notice Huo Qu Bing, but since he is the Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu, he will just send one of his warriors to compete. Who knew he was just like Huo Qu Bing, always pulling the unexpected. This really has become a life and death situation. But the person holding my hand is Huo Qu Bing. Even in the face of life or death, he would never back away.

I held Huo Qu Bing's hand and suddenly smiled widely. He looked surprised and then smiled back at me. He held my hand and stood up, facing Yi Zhi Xie "I don't have a horse or a bow and arrow. I will bother you to please prepare it."

Yi Zhi Xie gave a small smile "If you lose, I don't want your head. I just want you to work for me, and not as a master and servant. I will treat you like a brother, and I will still persuade the Xiong Nu of this region to respect the Hans."

Yi Zhi Xie's guards and Mu Da Duo all gasped, and the Xiong Nu on the street looked at Yi Zhi Xie, and then at Huo Qu Bing. Huo Qu Bing just laughed "What an honor to have you look upon me thusly. But I must apologize, I am a Han person and in this entire world, I will only work for the Han. If I lose, all I can give you is just my head!"

Yi Zhi Xie was silent for a moment and then smiled towards my joined hands with Huo Qu Bing "Your lady wife is a Gui Su person? The culture of the Gui Su and the Xiong Nu are quite similar...." I cut off the rest of his sentence, lightly biting my tongue to say "Whatever he wishes to do, is what I wish to do."

Yi Zhi Xie's eyes flashed a sudden shock and he kept staring at my

eyes. I smiled and directly met his eyes back. I didn't avoid him, with no fear or hatred, just a look without any emotion. Like the look one might give a stranger who was staring.

Mu Da Duo was so nervous she was actually shaking. After some time, Yi Zhi Xie looked disappointed and a bit saddened, shaking his head and then turning to walk away. His guards hurried to keep up.

Huo Qu Bing and I held hands and followed behind them. Everyone on the street parted to let us through. The guards turned to look at me, shooting me pitiful and sympathetic stares. Mu Du Duo kept glancing at me, indicating that I need to leave. I pretended not to see and continued on my way.

Huo Qu Bing whispered to me "Is his archery skills top notch? Why are those guys staring at me like I'm a dead fish?" I smiled and nodded "Very top notch, the best of the best." He says a soft "Oh" and then confidently continued to walk forward.

Tie Niu Mu brought over a horse with a bow and arrow. Huo Qu Bing picked up the bow and arrow and tried it out. He held the reins and looked at me. I smiled back "I will be here waiting for you."

He leaped on the horse and with a brilliant smile "Wonderful Yu Er, thank you! With a wife like you, that is all I can ask for." And then he was off, with the bow on his back, never once looking back.

Mu Da Duo sidled up next to me, staring into the distance, softly saying "Big sister, so that night on the streets of Chang An, we had already met. Shan.....my lord's martial arts prowess is something you are familiar with. Aren't you scared? He's also a strange one. It's clear to see how much he likes big sister, and this time out determines life and death, yet he never once looked back at you."

I smiled but didn't respond. How can I not be afraid? But there are some things in life that must be done even if there is fear.

In the sky, a flock of wild geese flew overhead. Yi Zhi Xie told the people setting up the targets to stop, smiling as he pointed to the sky “How about we use the flock of wild geese to determine the winner. In the time of half an incense stick, the one who shoots down more wins.” Huo Qu Bing smiled and nodded.

The incense was lit and the two of them took off towards the wild geese. Their first arrows were released at almost the exact same time. The two of them have to ride lightening fast and chase the geese which are flying everywhere, and they have to release their arrows quickly before the geese fly out of shooting range.

Such vivid competition far exceeds the excitement of watching arrows hit a target. Over a thousand people have gathered to watch, everyone is silent and holding their breaths watching the two men on horse back. All we can hear on the plains are the sound of horse hooves and the cries of the wild geese.

My worry disrupts me. I doubt there is anyone here with better eyesight than me, but I actually lose count of how many Huo Qu Bing has shot down. I glance at Mu Da Duo and she also looks distressed, shaking her head “I can’t keep count, I’ve already lost count. If I knew, I would have just counted Shan.....my lord’s hits.”

Initially I was nervously looking between Yi Zhi Xie and then Huo Qu Bing, crying out in my heart to hurry, hurry, please hurry. But suddenly I relaxed. If everything was already determined, then why fret. I stopped looking at Yi Zhi Xie and just stared at Huo Qu Bing. Whether it is him riding fast or the wild geese flying fast, I just quietly admire his stance on his horse and his form as he pulls the bow. Little by little, I engrave this image in my heart.

Half a stick of incense passes and there is a call of “Time’s up!” The two men immediately halt their taut bows and head back. Yi Zhi Xie’s guards are already collecting the dead geese. Everyone looks worriedly at the people collecting the geese. Yet Huo Qu Bing and Yi Zhi Xie pay no heed to that and ride back side-by-side just laughing and talking. Whatever

they said to each other, it caused both of them to roar in laughter, showcasing their confident spirits.

After jumping off the horse, Yi Zhi Xie complimented Huo Qu Bing “What superb archery skills, what excellent riding skills!” Huo Qu Bing, who normally has no idea what the word modest means, actually bows back and laughs “Likewise, likewise.”

The guards have returned to announce the tally “The white arrow shot down twenty-two, the black arrow shot down....twenty-three.”

Everyone gasped out loud, some looking happy, others looking sad. My heart lurched and then immediately calmed. I give the most loving look towards Huo Qu Bing. When he hears the tally, he can’t help but smile. He turns to look at me, apologetic. I smile and nod to him, and he smiles and nods back.

Yi Zhi Xie solemnly gives a Xiong Nu respectful bow to Huo Qu Bing, very sincerely asking him “Please reconsider what I offered earlier.” He was bowing to Huo Qu Bing in the position of the Shan Yu, and everyone around him looked shocked and stunned. Huo Qu Bing laughed “I already said before that I am a Han person. I will only do what a Han person wants. I am willing to gamble and pay the price. You don’t need to say anything more.”

When he was done talking, he ignored everyone and took big steps towards me. In front of everyone he pulled me into his embrace, half lifted my veil, and lowered his head and kissed me. The buzzing around us ceased and turned to silence.

In the silent plains, even the wind appears to have stopped. All I can hear is his heartbeat and my heartbeat. Everything faded from my heart, so that in this entire world there was only him and me, me and him.

In a brief moment, it felt like an entire lifetime. From the first time I saw him and ours eyes met until this very moment, all these memories

flashed through my mind. In this moment I finally knew, that in the little by little, in the unaware and the subconscious, he had already permanently carved himself on my heart.

At the cusp of losing him, I finally understood how much I fear losing him. My heart hurts, hurts so much that my body shakes in his embrace. But.....the heavens are cruel sometimes. So all I can do is use every ounce of my passion to kiss him back. Let him know my heart.

This is our first real kiss, and it will become be our last real kiss. He embraced me with all his might, and I embraced him back with everything I've got. But even the most intimate moments must end, and he slowly pulled away from my lips. He tenderly fixed my veil "Yu Er, promise me one thing, send my coffin back to Chang An, I don't want to perish in a foreign land. And someone is there looking for....." His eyes flashed pain and a complicated array of emotions, but he didn't finish what he was saying. He warmly smiled "Promise me, you must go back to Chang An."

I know he's scared that I'll do what I joked about earlier and follow him to the ground, so he's purposely making me promise to do this. I could care less what he's saying, but to make him at ease, I lightly nodded my head. But in my heart I had already decided.

My heart was shattering into a million small pieces, and each piece is like the sharpest pin that flows through my blood and making my entire body hurt. But I have to be brave and smile before him. I want the last thing he sees is a smiling me, a beautiful me. I don't want him to worry about me.

He silently stared at me for some time, his eyes reflecting a million types of longing. In the end he kissed me on the forehead and slowly released me. He turned to Yi Zhi Xie's guard and laughed "Can I borrow a large sword."

The Xiong Nu may be bold, but everyone is still stunned to see this wholly brave and unheard of gesture. Mu Da Duo stares slack jawed and turns to look at me. I smile at her, and then leap to her side and grab the

dagger on her waist. “I need to borrow this! And in a bit I’ll be needing to ask little sister a favor.”

Mu Da Duo’s face lost all color and she bit her lips, wanting to counsel me. But she turned to look at Yi Zhi Xie and she kept her silence. Yi Zhi Xie and his guards stood still for some moments before Tie Niu Mu unsheathed his sword. Huo Qu Bing accepted the sword and swung it towards his neck. I know I ought to shut my eyes, but I will never miss the final moment of looking at him. I open my eyes wide and suck in my breath. As the sword swung towards his neck, it also swung towards my neck. The scent of death comes toward us.

Yi Zhi Xie suddenly shouted “Wait a moment.” Yi Zhi Xie looked at the collected wild geese and the two guards who collected it. The two immediately knelt down. My heart lurched and I could care less about anything else at this moment. I rushed past Yi Zhi Xie and started flipping through the dead geese.

All of the white arrows penetrated the geese between its eyes, while all the black arrows hit the geese through the chest and straight for the heart. Except for one goose, which was shot between the eyes but it was a black arrow. I had my suspicions, but this is not something that can be proven, unless Yi Zhi Xie himself.....

Yi Zhi Xie was calm and he appears to have a small smile. He took a handkerchief from Mu Da Duo and cleaned his hands, smiling at the two men kneeling on the ground. A flash of silver light as fast as lightning, and one man had already lost his head, which rolled on the ground a few times. The onlookers all gasped and immediately fell silent, looking at Yi Zhi Xie with great fear.

Killing someone isn’t unusual for the warriors of the world to see. But to kill someone with a smile, so gracefully and without even seeming to dirty himself, is rare indeed. It was like he merely waved his hand and plucked a flower. The other kneeling guard was sprayed with blood but continued calmly kneeling without moving a muscle.

Yi Zhi Xie stared at his own sword until the last drop of blood fell. Then he put the sword back in its sheath. Calmly and gently he asked, like he was talking with a friend “Tell me the truth.”

The guard bowed and spoke with his voice shaking “When we were collecting the wild geese, because.....we were too bold and plucked off a white arrow and replaced it with a black arrow when no one was looking.” Yi Zhi Xie smiled “You have been by my side for many years, you know what I hate the most.”

All the other guards kneeled, wanting to beg forgiveness but unable to speak. Tie Niu Mu looked at Mu Da Duo but she just shook her head. Yi Zhi Xie turned away from the kneeling guard and went to speak to Huo Qu Bing, apologizing “I can’t believe my servant would do something like this.” Huo Qu Bing replied “Brother you have quite the honorable spirit.”

The covered in blood guard bowed three times to Yi Zhi Xie’s back before grabbing a sword and stabbing himself through the chest. Everyone gasped but then quieted when Yi Zhi Xie looked around. Everyone looked down and avoided meeting Yi Zhi Xie’s eyes. Yi Zhi Xie glanced at the dead guard and said “Make sure his family is well taken care of.”

A competition has ended on this note, so that even if the Han onlookers are pleased, they still look upon Yi Zhi Xie with some trepidation. Everyone stays quiet or starts slipping away. The Xiong Nu look crestfallen and slowly shuffle off. The Xi Yu people are long used to being stuck between the fighting of the Hans and the Xiong Nu, so this isn’t anything new to them, and they all disperse as well.

With such a sharp rise and fall in what just happened, just then I was focused on letting him not worry about me since my mind was set, it was just a matter of who went first and who followed. But now my heart has relaxed, and the thought that if it was just one second later, he would have.....before my eyes..... I just stare at him in a daze.

Huo Qu Bing is also staring at me, and when our eyes meet, we smile and start walking at the same moment towards each other. We reach for

each other's hand, and without a word, having the same thought, we turn and start walking away.

Yi Zhi Xie called out behind us "Please wait a moment. May I have your names?" Huo Qu Bing laughed "Just a chance encounter, if we are fated we'll meet again. Our names are not worth mentioning."

Yi Zhi Xie laughed "I am genuinely trying to make a friend in you both. Just a friend. Setting aside everything else, it's been a long time since I met a kindred spirit, and enjoyed myself so much. I would like to treat you both to a feast and we can get drunk." Huo Qu Bing replied "I am also in admiration of brother's honor and confidence. But we have something pending and we need to rush to meet our family merchant caravan. We really can't stay."

Yi Zhi Xie sighed "Then I must hope that we are destined to meet again." He ordered two horses brought over, and one horse even has the bow and arrow from earlier. It was his gift "Since you are in such a rush, please don't decline this."

These are rare horse flesh indeed, and Huo Qu Bing isn't one to pretend to be reserved, so he laughed and accepted it "We're not deserving, but thank you."

We rode the horses and took off, and after riding some distance away, Huo Qu Bing turned around to look at Yi Zhi Xie "That man was some personage! Looking at his every gesture, he must have already suspected his guards when the tally was announced. But to force me to work for him, he kept silent until the very last second to reveal the truth. He is calculating and doesn't trust anybody, vicious and cold. Yet there is honor in him. I can't figure him out!"

I startled and said "But seeing the way you behaved back there, you seemed to compliment him and didn't have this level of understanding. You acted like he was just any warrior....." Before I finished, I understood what had happened. The competition between Huo Qu Bing and Yi Zhi Xie was a real life and death battle only after they finished shooting down the

geese. Before they were just competing on physical skill, but afterwards they were competing on mental tactics. If Huo Qu Bing made one wrong move and Yi Zhi Xie became suspicious, then likely what Yi Zhi Xie gave us wouldn't have been these two horses.

A lone horse suddenly rode past us, and the man on that horse gave Huo Qu Bing a glance and his entire expression changed. Huo Qu Bing immediately whipped my horse and his with a laugh "Looks like one wave is starting before the other wave has calmed down. Yu Er, we have to escape for our lives now. That man who just passed us is the former Han general Zhao Xin. He recognized me, and they won't let me leave here alive. I just hope there isn't a Xiong Nu army nearby. I'm not afraid of those ten or so people back there."

I rode faster and smiled bitterly "There.....there is likely a Xiong Nu army nearby. It might not be a lot, but it will surely be the best of the best." I turned to look back. Zhao Xin had jumped off the horse and bowed to Yi Zhi Xie, and immediately Yi Zhi Xie and everyone got right on their horses.

Huo Qu Bing laughed "Just like I suspected. That man must be a high ranking official in the Xiong Nu." The Xiong Nu chasing us have increased greatly in numbers and the sound of horses thundering causes the entire plain to tremble. I said "His.....name is Yi Zhi Xie" and I bit my lip.

Chapter 22: Fleeing

Huo Qu Bing said “Ah” before asking “The Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu?”

I nodded and he was silent for awhile before suddenly laughing “What an exhilarating day this turned out to be. I actually beat the Xiong Nu’s Shan Yu. Too bad we have to flee for our lives now.”

I looked around as I urged my horse faster “This area is just open plains and we can’t hide. If we can enter the Qi Lian Mountains, I’ll have a way to shake them. The hundreds of miles of Qi Lian Mountain ranges, along with the help of the wolf pack, no one is more familiar with that area than me.” Huo Qu Bing smiled and agreed.

The horses Yi Zhi Xie gave us are indeed prime horse flesh. After riding for a few hours, it’s starting to get tired but continues to thunder ahead at full speed. But the pursuing army behind us can change horses, so they continue to bridge the distance between us.

If they don’t shoot at us, we might have a shot. But if they shoot..... Just as I was thinking this, Huo Qu Bing suddenly tried to pull me on his horse to ride in front of him. I pushed him away angrily “What’s faster. Two people on two mounts or two people on one? Who do you think I am? When you were practicing archery in the Yu Lin Army, I was already escaping for my life on these plains. I don’t need you to use your back to block arrows for me.”

Huo Qu Bing hesitated and agreed “Fine! But you can’t let them hurt you.” The Qi Lian Mountains are coming into view a distance away, so Huo Qu Bing and I get our energy back up. But behind us the arrows are starting to fly, though it is aimed for our horses. Looks like Yi Zhi Xie wants to capture Huo Qu Bing alive no matter what.

Huo Qu Bing uses one hand to control the horse and his other to

deflect the arrows with his bow. I also use my sash to deflect the arrows near my horse. He smiled “Yu Er, help me deflect the arrows” and then he picked up three arrows in one hand and released it behind him. It flew out like shooting stars and the closest three horses whined and collapsed on the ground.

I used my sash to deflect the arrows and smiled at him “Excellent archery skill, you hit the horses directly in the forehead.” Huo Qu Bing proudly winked at me “I thank my madam wife for the compliment.” I coldly huffed and retracted my sash, leaving him scrambling to deflect the arrows.

Watching him fussing, I almost started to laugh, when suddenly an arrow came towards me aimed for my back. I shifted to avoid the arrow, but then a flurry of arrows continued to come towards me, all of them aimed for my vital parts. I concentrated now and used the sash to deflect the arrows. The arrows flying towards Huo Qu Bing continue to aim for his horse, and he yelled in rage “If you want to shoot, shoot me!”

When I turn back, I see Mu Da Duo with her arrow aimed at my throat. I couldn’t believe it. In my shock one arrow slips through and Huo Qu Bing has no choice but to reach over and deflect it. His horse is shot, but the arrow only makes it go faster.

“Yu Er!” he angrily yelled at me. I turned and saw his expression and it immediately woke me up “I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.”

Mu Da Duo continues to send arrow after arrow towards me, and I continue to avoid it. Her face is expressionless and now I am also calm, my movements swift and sure. But....but I couldn’t understand. Where was the person who called me big sister, where did she go? Was there only betrayal on these plains?

Mu Da Duo ordered the person next to her, who hesitated for a moment, and then also began to aim directly for me rather than for my horse. Yi Zhi Xie suddenly appeared “Duo Er, what are you doing?”

Mu Da Duo's hand shook and she didn't look at Yi Zhi Xie "Shan Yu, we want to capture Huo Qu Bing alive and use this to shake the entire Han dynasty and invigorate the Xiong Nu. But this woman is useless. We can do this to disrupt Huo Qu Bing's concentration, and it will help us in capturing him."

Yi Zhi Xie said nothing so Zhao Xin piped up "The Shan Yu values talent and wants Huo Qu Bing to defect. But Huo Qu Bing's personality will never consent. If the Shan Yu wants to capture Huo Qu Bing alive, what the queen said makes sense." Yi Zhi Xie looked at Huo Qu Bing and then nodded. Huo Qu Bing saw my face change and worriedly asked "What were they discussing?"

I see that we are almost at the base of the Qi Lian Mountains so I forced a smile "I'm going to take a gamble. If I'm right, then maybe we'll earn us an opportunity." Huo Qu Bing nodded "But don't do anything stupid. I won't accept it. Either we live together or we die together."

"I know!" and I slowly reached for my face veil, staring at Mu Da Duo. She finally lost her calm and a look of fear passed through her face. Her hands swiftly sent more arrows towards me. Seeing her behavior, then my suspicion is probably correct.

My veil floated away in the air and I smiled back at Yi Zhi Xie. His expression changed immediately and he hollered "Stop!" He looked confused and dazed. My horse leaped into the Qi Lian Mountains and Huo Qu Bing's horse followed.

Yi Zhi Xie looked at Mu Da Duo "Duo Er, did you see that? Was that.....was that Yu Jin?"

With a few hundred soldiers chasing us, suddenly there were no arrows shooting at us. Mu Da Duo cried "I.....I don't know. But it shouldn't be. Shan Yu, Yu Jin is dead. If she was really Yu Jin, she wouldn't be like this."

Yi Zhi Xie blankly nodded “She ought to hate me, and not smile at me.” He suddenly shouted at me “Yu Jin, is that you? Is that really you?” I laughed back at him “What do you think?”

Zhao Xin bowed to Yi Zhi Xie on respectfully said “Your humble servant doesn’t know who that girl is, but none of that is important. Shan you, the person we want to capture is Huo Qu Bing.”

Yi Zhi Xie suddenly snapped out of it, and I glared at Zhao Xin. If anything happened to us, then I will make sure to drag you down with me. Yi Zhi Xie stared at the Qi Lian Mountains and coldly ordered “A million pieces of gold to anyone who kills Huo Qu Bing. But do not hurt that girl.” The hate from Mu Da Duo’s eyes hit me like fiery daggers, sending a shiver up my spine.

“Qu Bing!” at the edge of life and death, we have no time to waste. I exchanged a look with him and we both leaned on our horses. A flurry of arrows like the rain came flying towards Huo Qu Bing. I used my sash to deflect it for him, but in a second his horse has been shot through and falls to the ground.

The moment the horse collapsed, he grabbed my sash and used the pull to leap towards the forest. The moment we entered the hillside, he immediately dove between the trees and pulled his bow. In a flash three arrows flew out and three more horses collapsed. The road is narrow in this mountain range and the fallen horses send the pursuers into a disarray.

I slapped my horse and let it fly while I leaped into the forest. I glanced over and saw Yi Zhi Xie pulling back his bow. I turn to look in the direction Huo Qu Bing went, seeing that it is dense and hard to see through. Yi Zhi Xie cannot see Huo Qu Bing at all, but he calculated in the direction where Huo Qu Bing launched his arrows and used that to lock in his target. He sends three arrows flying, all aimed to kill in three different vital organs. Huo Qu Bing managed to deflect two, but the third hits him.

I tightly bit my lip and refrain from making any noise. I run up to assist Huo Qu Bing and he just smiles and shakes his head at me, indicating

that he can walk. I nodded and we started running. I let out a few low howls and got the wolves in the forest to answer back. I feel some relief, but when I turn back, I see that half his shirt is soaked through with blood.

The howling in the forest grows louder. Huo Qu Bing follows behind me, and when we reach a creek, I stop to examine his wound. I want to pull the arrow out but he tells me to wait. He runs around the entire creek once, and then jumps in the water, telling me now to pull out the arrow.

I use my sash to bind his elbow, and with my teeth clenched, I swiftly pull out the arrow. His blood splurts out and falls into the creek, quickly washing away. He smiled as usual and showed me how to bind the wound so it would stop bleeding yet not affect his movement. I'm used to seeing blood, but seeing his blood flying turns me dizzy and my hands weak. I don't want him to have to reassure me at this time, so I try to look calm and keep my hands still. I bandage him up without saying a word.

To hide our scent, we walk in the water upstream. Because Yi Zhi Xie's is so strong, the wound was very deep. Even after bandaging, it still continues to bleed. Even though Huo Qu Bing looks fine, but his face is growing ever more pale. I looked around "It's almost dark, we need to find a place to rest." He nodded.

Suddenly a black form darted out, and I gasped and placed myself in front of Huo Qu Bing. He also turned and protected me. We have the exact same instinct, fearful that the other person will be harmed. When I see that it is Brother Wolf, I am so happy and run to embrace him. Brother Wolf leads us a way to a small waterfall. He howled to me and then ran under the waterfall.

I held Huo Qu Bing's hand and we walked under the waterfall together. Who knew there was a cave behind the waterfall. It's a little damp, but a good place to hide out. A normal person would never suspect there was a cave behind this waterfall. This area being so damp, even a tracking dog would lose our scent.

I picked a higher area and had Huo Qu Bing sit down. I checked his

arm before turning to leave “There should be leaves nearby that can stop the bleeding. I’ll go find some.” He immediately stopped me “I can handle this little wound. Yi Zhi Xie is intent on capturing me. Even if you have the wolves scaring them off, but the animals are still no match for trained soldiers. We haven’t shaken them yet....”

I covered his mouth “Because we haven’t shaken them is why I need to staunch your bleeding. If you keep losing blood, do you want me to piggyback you and escape? As a General, don’t you know what is more important?” He stared at me and didn’t say a word. I laughed “I’ll take Brother Wolf with me. Don’t worry, nothing will happen.”

He handed the bow and arrow to me “Do you know how to shoot?” I wanted to decline, but then to let him feel more at ease, I accepted it “I know how.”

A bright clear moon out, the creek waters are rushing, the insects are humming. It’s a beautiful Summer night, giving off the illusion that there is no danger.

Brother Wolf swiftly bounds between the grass and rocks, with me following him and leaping to catch up. I grab some fruit to eat along the way. Brother Wolf’s eyesight is better than mine and he spots the healing grass first. I actually don’t know that the grass is called, I just know the wolves use it to heal when they are hurt, so I call it the healing grass.

I bit down on the fruit as I race back towards the waterfall. Just before I reach the waterfall, Brother Wolf let out a warning howl and protectively crouched in front of me. He faced off with a few large black dogs.

Yi Zhi Xie and Mu Da Duo walk out of the trees. We face each other with Brother Wolf and the dogs between us. My eyes dart all around, seemingly to check if they brought more men, but really to assess whether they noticed the waterfall.

Yi Zhi Xie looked at me without talking, so Mu Da Duo asked

“Where is Huo Qu Bing?” I tossed the eaten fruit aside “To distract your attention, we split up.” Mu Da Duo looked at Yi Zhi Xie, while Yi Zhi Xie stared at my eyes, not wavering for a moment. Mu Da Duo’s face starts to turn white. Yi Zhi Xie softly asked, as if making a loud noise will scare me away “Are you Yu Jin?”

After so many years, he’s barely changed. He is still the Xiong Nu’s most handsome man. But I am no longer the girl who gazed adoringly at him. I was silent and then I shook my head “I’m not.” Mu Da Duo appeared to let out a pent up breath. Yi Zhi Xie wanted to walk forward but Brother Wolf gave him a loud piercing warning howl. The entire forest lit up with howls.

I was so angry I kicked Brother Wolf. I howled once and the howling ceased in the forest. Behind the waterfall, Huo Qu Bing might not know what is happening out here. But with Brother Wolf’s meddling, Huo Qu Bing clearly must be aware now.

Yi Zhi Xie slowly walked towards me, one step at a time. My words were intended for Huo Qu Bing, so I shouted at Yi Zhi Xie “Don’t come any closer. If you come closer, I will.....I will...” I pointed the arrow tip at my heart “I will kill myself.” Yi Zhi Xie hurriedly backed up a few steps, joyfully saying “You are Yu Jin.”

I looked at Mu Da Duo and asked “Yi Zhi Xie, whether or not I am Yu Jin, is that important? If I am Yu Jin, what you are you going to do?” He looked dazed still, murmuring “You’re still alive. You are actually still alive.” He stared at me as to confirm that I was really there “But you don’t hate me?”

I laughed “I already said I am not Yu Jin. Yu Jin is dead. The me today has no relationship to you. The person you want to capture is Huo Qu Bing. If you are still that great and honorable young lord, then don’t pressure a simple girl like me. Let me go!”

Yi Zhi Xie spoke to me in Xiong Nu, but I kept responding in Han language to let Huo Qu Bing understand that I was trying to extricate

myself and he needs to stay calm. Yi Zhi Xie looked up at the moon, while Mu Da Duo just stared at him with her eyes filled with unshed tears.

Yi Zhi Xie's sleeve billowed in the wind and he smiled at the moon "Yu Jin, I wish that when you saw me, you would strike me. I wish that you were filled with hatred for me. That would prove that I was always in your heart, and you had never forgotten me. But....but I could never have imagined that you would look at me like I was a stranger."

He lowered his head and looked into my eyes "No matter what the occasion, whether it was the Shan Yu or the Crown Prince, when everyone else paid attention to them, you only had eyes for me. It was filled with admiration, and trust. You were still young, but it was like your eyes understood everything. My hurt, my tolerance, my anxiety, you saw everything in your eyes. You would be sad for me, you would be happy for me. Is all of that gone now?"

I unconsciously touched my eyes, and then looked at Mu Da Duo "Perhaps in the past Yu Jin looked at you that way, but now there is someone else who looks at you that way. What she sees is different than what Yu Jin saw, but in her eyes there is only you." Yi Zhi Xie turned to look at Mu Da Duo, and she stopped resisting and her tears spilled forth. Yi Zhi Xie looked conflicted in that moment, and he took out a handkerchief for her.

He suddenly said "Yu Jin, since you don't hate me, then come home with me".

I laugh and reply in Xiong Nu "Unless you want to see me dead and cart back a corpse, then go ahead!" And then I switched to Han "Yi Zhi Xie, my Papa was a Han person. You know he always wanted me to go back to the Han dynasty. I am really happy there right now. Don't force me, if you have any regret left in you."

Yi Zhi Xie asked "Huo Qu Bing just left you and took off? Did you.....marry him? Forget it, that doesn't matter to us Xiong Nu."

I was getting angry “He did leave me. You shot him with your arrow and he can’t move fast. He didn’t want to burden me, so he lied that he couldn’t move and needed me to go find some food. When I got back, he was gone.” I bit my lip and tears came to my eyes. “Don’t let me find him, otherwise I’ll shoot another arrow into him.”

My words sounded real enough based on our personalities, and Yi Zhi Xie clearly believed me. He was silent and started walking towards me, ignoring Brother Wolf’s warning “Yu Jin, come back with me.”

His eyes were steady and unwavering, causing me to lose my calm and I pointed my arrow at him “Don’t come closer, I will never go back with you.” He smiled and shook his head “Yu Jin, you want to use the arrow that I taught you how to use to shoot me? Remember when you were small, you sat in front of me on a horse, I held your hand and taught you how to shoot....”

He continued to walk calmly towards me, ignoring the arrow in my hand. A few dogs surrounded Brother Wolf. My hands were shaking and I said in Xiong Nu “Stop. I won’t go back with you. I wont.....” I heard Brother Wolf’s howl, telling me that Huo Qu Bing is getting close to us. I was so nervous that before I could think clearly, the arrow had flown out.

I stare in fear at the arrow, while Yi Zhi Xie pins a look of despair and disbelief at me. Mu Da Duo flew forward and collapsed on the ground in a soft thud. Yi Zhi Xie was stunned for a moment before realizing what happened. He looked at Mu Da Duo with fear and went to pick her up.

I walked over to them “I’m sorry, Mu Da Duo, I....” I couldn’t continue. How did we come to try and kill each other? I suddenly started viciously hitting Yi Zhi Xie. With his skills, he didn’t avoid me and allowed my fists to rain over his body “It’s you, why do you have to keep doing these things. Why do you force us so that we can’t live in harmony. Why didn’t you let my Papa go? Why didn’t you let me go? And now because of you, us sisters have turned against each other....”

Yi Zhi Xie didn’t respond to what I said, only looking down at Mu Da

Duo's wound. She took a few deep breaths and looked at me "Big sister, I'm sorry, I shouldn't hate you. It has nothing to do with you. I even hired Xi Yu people to go to Chang An...." I shook my head at her "It's not your fault, it's all Yi Zhi Xie's fault."

Her tears kept falling "It's not his fault, it's all me. He cherishes me only because my personality is so similar to yours, and he's filled with so much guilt towards you. I was just envious, it was my fault...."

Yi Zhi Xie covered Mu Da Duo's mouth "Don't say anymore. Yu Jin is right, it's my fault." He whistled and picked Mu Da Duo up and walked away "Duo Er, you won't die. I'll make sure you live. Didn't you always want to go to the lake with me to play? When you're all better, let's go immediately."

Yi Zhi Xie turned around and looked at me, like there was a million things he wanted to say. Mu Da Duo held his arm and coughed "Re....really? My body feels so cold, so cold...." Yi Zhi Xie looked down at Mu Da Duo "Really. I will take you to a doctor immediately. You'll be fine....." He carried Mu Da Duo farther until they were already at the trees. He turned back to look at me, but then a violent cough from Mu Da Duo made her bleed more. He didn't hesitate anymore and quickly disappeared into trees.

Under the cold wind and the lonely moon, I stand there staring in a daze at where they disappeared. Huo Qu Bing embraced me from behind "If she gets to a doctor in time, she'll live. Even though she lost a lot of blood, the arrow didn't hit a vital area. And when you were shooting you didn't intend to kill and your hands were shaky. The arrow likely didn't pierce her very deep."

Bleeding? I immediately cleared my head and looked around, quickly pulling him back into the cave with me. I gave him the fruit and then applied the medicine on his wound. Huo Qu Bing said "Tear off pieces of your robe and tie it on the wolves. Have them run around the areas you've been. Because Yi Zhi Xie has to consider how that girl feels, he can't come for you. But he will absolutely send people back to find you. Let's stay here

and not leave for the next three days until they have completely searched the area.” I did as he suggested.

The medicine worked like a charm and his bleeding has stopped. I feel relieved and suddenly remembered what just happened. “Mu Da Duo will be fine?” He laughed and hugged me “The powerful Shan Yu can’t save the life of a girl? She’ll be fine. You’re just fazed right now, but if you think clearly about what just happened, don’t you realize that the girl was intending that. In a short moment she used a very powerful tactic to win. How could a girl like that die?”

I was silent and then snuggled into his embrace “I’m sorry. We should have left immediately after we visited Papa. I shouldn’t have wanted to go play, causing all this trouble.” Huo Qu Bing caressed my cheek and smiled “I’m the one who should be sorry. My lady wife wants to go play and I didn’t protect her properly, causing my lady wife to be alarmed. After I chase the Xiong Nu out of the Desert South and it falls under Han rule, then you can play all you want and never get bothered.”

I grabbed his hand and bit it hard. He howled that it hurt and I chided him “Don’t you dare call me lady wife again.” He thought and then said “Then darling wifey?” I acted like I wanted to bite him again so he quickly said “Yu Er, I’ll call you Yu Er.” I glared at him and then started laughing with my face pressed against his hand. Before I finished laughing, I was already crying.

He didn’t say anything and just stroked my hair “Qu Bing, you should know who Yu Dan was, right? My Papa was his teacher. I am not Papa’s real daughter, just someone he brought back from the wolf pack. Back then I didn’t want to be there.....the first time I met Yi Zhi Xie, he.....”

This was the first time I discussed my own past. When I got to a happy part, I would laugh and laugh, and when I got to a sad part, my tears wouldn’t stop flowing. From the moment I heard that Papa died and I cried for days, I have never cried about the past before. I was afraid that I wasn’t strong enough, and if I started crying then all my courage would disappear. I pretended that I wasn’t sad and tried to live my life. But today I’m not

afraid. I can cry and laugh as much as I like. In talking and talking, I actually don't even remember when I fell asleep.

Chapter 23: Football

“What are you thinking about?” Huo Qu Bing tenderly asked. I pulled back my gaze and lowered the carriage curtain, turning back to smile at him “I’m going to miss Brother Wolf.” Huo Qu Bing held my hand “We do need to thank Brother Wolf for getting us out of Qi Lian Mountains, but I feel like you’re more reluctant to return to Chang An.” I furrowed my brows but didn’t respond. He was silent for some time before saying “I also don’t want to return to Chang An.” I thought about it and realized his meaning. My heart ached for him so I laughed “You’re the only one who thinks I’m a treasure. No one will be fighting you for me.”

Huo Qu Bing smiled and then pulled me into his embrace without another word. My head rested on his knees and I wearily closed my eyes. Huo Qu Bing slightly shifted and made me more comfortable “If you’re tired just sleep awhile.” I replied “It’s stuffy to ride in a carriage. If you’re bored you can go ride a horse. You don’t need to keep me company.” He gently rubbed my forehead “How could I possibly get bored when I’m facing you. Just get some rest.” I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

Right when I’m sleeping soundly I hear Zhao Puo Nu whispering in a low voice “General.” Huo Qu Bing raised the curtain “Is there news?” I glanced at Huo Qu Bing and then quickly scrambled up. Huo Qu Bing smiled and lightly patted my back, and then turned back to Zhao Puo Nu and Chen An Kang. They were riding alongside us. When they saw us immediately separate inside the carriage, Chen An Kang smiled and looked elsewhere, but Zhao Puo Nu looked alarmed and then reported that Li Guang and Zhang Ying have made contact. Li Guang’s army barely set out before they were met with forty thousand Xiong Nu forces from the Xiong Nu’s Left Sage King.

I sucked in my breath. The Xiong Nu place the left in the highest position, so the Left Sage King commands the most elite forces behind the Shan Yu’s own forces. Li Gan is with his father, so is he alright? Huo Qu Bing glanced at me but didn’t say anything. Zhao Puo Nu explained that Li Gan refused to back down in the face of a larger force and managed to penetrate into the Xiong Nu army and single handedly kill over 200

warriors, using his bravery to urge the Han army to withstand the siege and hang on until the backup army of Zhang Ying arrived.

Li Gan held down the fort for over a day until the backup army arrived and chased the Xiong Nu forces away. Huo Qu Bing was thrilled to hear of Li Gan's valor, though he scoffed at how slow the back up army had to be crawling along to arrive so late. Huo Qu Bing confirmed that Li Guang's army was under siege so he couldn't assist Huo Qu Bing, but what about Gong Xun Aou's forces? Chen An Kang confirmed that, just as Huo Qu Bing suspected, Gong Xun Aou's forces got lost in the desert. Huo Qu Bing laughed that his uncle is surely going to face a head ache when he gets back.

Zhao Puo Nu cheerfully suggested that this foray was to chase the Xiong Nu out of the River West area and we have succeeded at that mission. Even though General Li Guang and General Gong Xun Aou did not end up participating, the Emperor should be so pleased with Huo Qu Bing winning the Qi Lian Mountains and kicking the crap out of the Xiong Nu that he will likely not severely reprimand General Gong Xun. Huo Qu Bing has a slight smile but said nothing, only waving them off.

He sat there quietly, not sure what he was thinking about. He didn't move for quite some time, so I shook his elbow "What are you thinking about? You earned quite an accomplishment, wondering what the Emperor will bestow upon you?" He smiled and whoosh he had me pinned underneath him "I only want the Emperor to bestow marriage. To you."

I was embarrassed and flustered and grabbed his hand which was venturing inside my robe "Didn't you said, before we got married, we wouldnt....." He smiled and kissed me on the lips "I said we wouldn't do that, but I didn't say we wouldn't kiss, we wouldn't hug, we wouldn't touch." I pushed him "There are people outside the carriage! Stop being so crazy." He let out a long sigh and then leaned on my elbow and hollered outside "Order the army to move faster so that we can set up camp faster." I laughed and chastised him "You're abusing your authority."

He leaned his head and lightly blew in my ear. If I laughed he'll surely

get more into it so I controlled myself not to laugh, keeping a straight face “What were you just thinking about?” He didn’t answer me, only lightly rubbing my ear lobes “People say that a big ear lobe is a sign of good fortune. You appear to have a lot of good fortune, and marrying me must be your biggest good fortune.”

I huffed “Nonsense! People say that a thin lip means unfaithful, which makes me afraid of marrying you.” He laughed “You still dare to argue with me?” and then he started nibbling on my ears, his tongue lightly tracing the ridges. My body turned weak and tingly, and his breathing got heavier and he got more into it. I quickly said “I know what you were thinking about earlier. You were thinking that between the Great General Wei and the Emperor, you’re stuck between them, so how are you to balance that delicate relationship.”

He stopped and caressed my cheek “You sure know how to change the subject.” I hesitated and then allowed my heartbeat to settle down “You’re not denying it, which means I’m right.” He sighed and stretched “Some things can be worried about after returning to Chang An. No reason to rush these things.” I was silent and then nodded “Right. Let’s not think of these things now. If we want to worry, we can worry after we get back to Chang An.”

He sat up straight and and rubbed my forehead, staring at me “I don’t care what you are worrying about, what you are scared about. All you need to remember is that I will be your husband, no matter what happens I will be there. In happiness or in sadness, we will face it together. In the future, it will not be you alone facing everything, but us facing things together.”

Our eyes met and my nose started to redden and my throat got all dry. I can’t say a single word, only reaching out my hand and our fingers tightly entwined with each others. From now on, I will no longer be a lone bird flying, with only me and my shadow as a companion. I have him.

.....

The night fires in the army camp burn brightly, and all around are

people laughing, crying, or fighting. Huo Qu Bing explains that to survive is a blessing, and they will surely be greatly rewarded when they return to Chang An. Being through a war and going back to greatly changed circumstances takes a while to work through all those complicated emotions.

I discuss how the military manuals I read said that army behavior must be tightly regulated in order to win battles. He lightly coughed and then tried to keep himself from laughing. I got annoyed and wanted to huff off, but he grabbed my hand “Lady wife, please don’t be mad, let your husband carefully explain this to you.” I shake off his hand “Who is your lady wife! If you continue to mock me, I don’t want to be your lady wife.” Huo Qu Bing embraced me and was about to whisper in my ear when I see Chen An Kang heading towards us so I quickly shake him off. Apparently General Li Guang is arriving to give his report.

Huo Qu Bing sees my frown and tells me I can’t hide, but I tell him to go do his official matters and I’ll go wander around. He knows I don’t want to see Li Gan so he let’s me off the hook.

I wander around and see a group of soldiers gathered around a fire tearing into a roasted rabbit. They discuss how to spend their newfound riches, and which dancing house is the best. Some complain that the girls at Luo Yu House are so high and mighty, but no one dares upset them because her highness the Consort is their staunch supporter. I sigh, realizing that Luo Yu House has clearly pissed off people without even realizing it.

As I was deep in thought, I felt someone staring at me. I look up and see Li Gan and Gong Xun Aou walking past following Huo Qu Bing. Li Gan looked at me and then a look of shock passed through his face as he recognized me. He looked at Huo Qu Bing, who just smiled back and then shook his head at me. Gong Xun Aou saw Li Gan looking at me so he also looked at me. When he recognized me, he shot me a look of disbelief, and then shot Huo Qu Bing a look of shock. I turned away and hurried into the tent. The things that will come are already arriving.

“Asleep?” Huo Qu Bing asked as he entered the darkened tent. “Not yet.” He embraced me from behind “Why are you sitting in the dark in a daze?” I was silent and when whispered “General Gong Xun Aou doesn’t seem happy to see me.”

Huo Qu Bing replied “He messed up so badly this time, normally he ought to lose his head, but lots of people in court will surely plead for him. But he will still be cast down as a commoner. Uncle (General Wei) feels greatly indebted to him for saving him from Princess Guantao years ago, so uncle will surely help him build up his accomplishments and regain his official title. But right now he’s clearly not going to be happy. And whether he’s happy or not has nothing to do with us. We should be happy for ourselves.”

I snuggled in his arms and used my fingers to count “It’s just me. But what about you? Your aunt is the Empress, one uncle is the Emperor, another uncle is a General, yet another uncle is the Great General, and your step-father is a high ranking official in court. Plus all their relatives. Even if I use all the fingers on my hands it’s not enough to count them.”

[Quick primer on the Wei siblings (who are really the Han dynasty equivalents of the Song sisters if you ask me): there are three sisters and one brother. The eldest is Wei Zhi Fu, who married Emperor Wu of Han (Liu Che) and became his Empress, next is Wei Jun Ru who married General Gong Xun Aou, next comes Wei Shao Er (Huo Qu Bing’s mother) who married a Han court official surnamed Chen (though she had Huo Qu Bing out of wedlock), and lastly there is youngest brother Wei Qing who married Princess Pingyang (the Emperor’s older sister. Whew, these Wei siblings sure can marry well.]

Huo Qu Bing tightened his arms and I yelped that it hurt, and he angrily chastised me “Why are you over thinking! I can determine my own life. I don’t listen to what others say if I don’t agree. Also, you have your wolf pack in Xi Yu. I’m afraid you’ll run back to Xi Yu if you’re unhappy. Who dares to make you even the slightest bit unhappy?”

I turned over and rested my head on his shoulder “I sense that you

don't like the politics in Chang An either. Why don't we run away! Travel from the South to the North, from the desert to the plains, we go wherever we want. Isn't that swell?" He was quiet for some time "Looks like Chang An really hurt you. In the past you always charged straight ahead without a care. You fought for anything, you dared to do anything. But now you want to run away, you're even too scared to go back to Chang An."

I felt bad so I forced a smile "I suppose I'm feeling some emotional exhaustion is all. I...."

He covered my mouth "I didn't mean anything by it so you don't need to explain. Just like you said, I'm not all alone. My grandmother and my mother were born of such low status, the Wei women found it hard to even find a man to marry. My mother, my aunt, and my uncle were all born without a father. I am also born out of wedlock. If it wasn't for my aunt (Empress Wei), I will probably carry the brand of being illegitimate and be a servant in the Princess' Estate. Or I might be like my uncle, and if I couldn't stand it anymore, run to my birth father's estate and be his stable hand and be treated worse than a pig or a dog by the lady of that house."

This is the first time Huo Qu Bing has spoken of his background. His usual arrogance is all gone, and my heart aches for him. I tightly hug his waist and he just smiles and shakes his head at me "Without aunt, even with uncle's prowess, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to succeed. And without aunt and uncle, no matter what I wanted to accomplish, there was no way I would lead an army to war at the age of eighteen. These things, Xi Ma Qian and those scholars were right about. Yu Er, my childhood dreams are close but not yet achieved. Also, right now the Crown Prince is only eight years old and needs guidance. Uncle is around but he's in an awkward situation. Since I was a child I've received the benefits from my family, and I cannot just receive and not give back. When I accomplish what I need to do, I will leave Chang An with you. And with the Emperor's temper...." He softly sighed "In truth, history shows that the only truly wise official was Fan Li (a scholar, general, and politician in the Chu Kingdom). He was born when his country was in need, and he helped reclaim lost territory. After he exerted his great will and vision, he left it all behind and went to travel the country. He managed to create an even more legendary life afterwards. His life was more exciting than a normal

person's two lifetimes."

I replied "I understand now. After the Xiong Nu no longer have any ability to attack the Han dynasty, then you will have fulfilled your childhood destiny. Then you will discuss other things." Huo Qu Bing smiled and lowered his head to kiss me on the cheek "I guess this means you have to live the old adage 'marry a dog follow a dog, marry a chicken follow a chicken.'" I coldly huffed at his "If you want to refer to yourself as a dog or a chicken, be my guest! But don't use that comparison on me. I want to happily be my snowy moonlight beauty."

He started laughing loudly and I hurried to shush him "Gong Xun Aou and Li Guang's tents are nearby." He continued to laugh and I glared at him before extinguishing the lamp. I started to make the bed and he smiled "Even though we said we would sleep apart, but I really miss you. We don't do that....let's just make out for a little bit." My face turned red and I admonished him "I don't know what you think about all day?"

Huo Qu Bing chuckled and sidled up next to me, with his nose buried in the crook of my neck and his hand on my chest, murmuring "Food, women, sex....if I don't think about those things that would mean something is wrong with me. If I wasn't so afraid you'd get pregnant, I really can't.....ay...." My body melted in his embrace, and the half made bed became a jumbled mess because of us. He suddenly stopped and buried his head down, with his body all stiff. I can hear him breathing heavily, and only some moments later did his breathing become normal. He raised his head and smiled "We're getting married the moment we reach Chang An. Otherwise all this is going to destroy me."

I lightly rubbed his eyebrows, really hurting for him. The entire Wei family, from the Empress on down to the Great General Wei, are all illegitimate. Huo Qu Bing is also illegitimate. People wouldn't dare insult them to their faces, but they constantly talk about them behind their backs. He acts like he doesn't care, but as a child he surely wondered why his dad didn't marry his mom. Why other people had a dad and he didn't? So now he doesn't want his own child to be subject to the same censure, so he wouldn't have a child before getting married.

He grabbed my finger and lightly kissed it, and then immediately let me go and stood up. He walked some distance away before turning to look back at me “Yu Er, sometimes you are so mesmerizing. Seeing you like this, I finally understand why some kings would rather have the beauty over the empire.” I didn’t do anything yet he made it seem like I was seducing him. I made a face at him and immediately fixed the blankets and got under the covers, deciding to ignore him.

He looked at me and then smiled “I noticed you didn’t eat much during dinner. And we’re sleeping late tonight, so you’ll probably be hungry in the middle of the night. Shall I ask the chef to bring some roast lamb in?” I shook my head and declined, but then shared with him what I had heard around the camp. Soldiers were complaining that they didn’t have enough to eat. Didn’t the Emperor send new provisions for him? If the army rations are running out, why doesn’t he share with the army since he can’t finish it all and we’re almost back to Chang An?

He smiled and fixed my blankets and gave me a history lesson. Some of the most powerful generals of the past did indeed train their soldiers well, so well the soldiers only responded to them and not to the Emperor. But what happened to them? The Emperor killed them after they served their purpose. The Great General Wei treats all his troops well and is beloved by his soldiers, yet look at him now, the Emperor no longer trusts him.

I was silent and then replied “I understand now. Sun Zi was right, but he missed one point. He didn’t teach those victorious generals how to keep their own heads after they won the war. In history, there are plenty of victorious generals, but very few that have emerged unscathed afterwards.”

He nodded and sat down next to me “The soldiers will surely be hating me for not sharing provisions with them, which I can easily do and earn their affection and praise. But why do I want their praise? The love of the people is something that can only belong to the Emperor. Especially people like me, who wield military power, we are what the rulers must guard against. If I take the Emperor’s provisions to win the soldiers’ affection, it will only harm me down the road. Some other generals like Li Guang do share their provisions because they are kind, but they can afford

to do so because they have won very few battles, so the Emperor will never worry about them. Think about it? If the Emperor hears that the soldiers love me, and with his current concern over my uncle, will I ever get another chance to lead an army?" He sighed "Because of this, even if I can't eat all those carts full of provisions, I can only keep it for myself."

I turned over to pick up the pillow "This whole way home you have been behaving oddly with the weirdest requests. You randomly ask soldiers to build you a football field, or go hunting with you for fun. Leisure and waste of time are perfect words to describe you. I was wondering what had gotten into you! But I thought you won those life and death battles, so whatever made you happy was fine. I didn't realize there was a reason to your madness. Come to think of it, my arrogant and direct behavior in Chang An was truly risky, and I probably skated by with some luck."

Huo Qu Bing took the pillow and put it down. He hesitated for awhile before saying the truth "In the latter part your behavior was pretty low key. But when you first started, your tactics were too blunt and direct. Your biggest luck was having the Shi Enterprises protecting you from the get go. If I didn't guess wrong, the Shi Enterprises must have been secretly getting rid of your obstacles for you. Otherwise, before Li Yan gained power, your dancing house wouldn't have been that smooth and successful. Plenty of businesses in Chang An have powerful backers, and a Princess who did not make her position clear at that time couldn't possibly help you. Afterwards, word got out that you saved me before, which helped temper your earlier actions. The Princess, for my sake, is also willing to let some things slide with you. The reason I was so anxious to tell the Princess about my relationship with you that day was because of my worry that your behavior would upset someone out there and the Princess wouldn't be willing to protect you. Without this, there would no way someone new to Chang An like you would rise so fast in Chang An."

I had my back to Huo Qu Bing and was looking for the fragrance ball, but my hand unconsciously clenched into a fist. I quickly released it and with a smile turned back to hang it up. I casually said "So this was what happened! To think I thought I did it all because of my own cleverness."

He silently looked at me, and my heart was feeling uneven. I peeked at

him but he just laughed and told me to get some rest. In the darkness, my eyes are wide open and I stare at the ceiling of the tent. The fragrance balls are hanging from the ceiling and releasing a light scent. When I return to Chang An, I will surely see him again. Does he still enjoy sitting in the bamboo pavilion, watching the pigeons take flight and land?

Huo Qu Bing is sleeping at the other side of the tent, and he asks in a low voice “Are you asleep?” I quickly shut my eyes, and in my nervousness I didn’t answer him. When I realized how oddly I was acting and wanted to respond, I realized that answering now would be even odder. I end up laying there in without saying a word. With sigh that is so soft I can barely hear it, Huo Qu Bing turned over and the tent resumed its normal silence.

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I sit on the hillside looking towards the direction of Chang An. Tomorrow we’ll be back in the city. The grass behind me crunched and I turned around to see Li Gan coming up to me. He smiled and made a bow, and I returned it. I asked “General Huo has summoned everyone to play football. You’re not playing?” He walked next to me and laughed “How could I not play? I got kicked by him until I was covered in dust and dirt. If I keep playing, I’ll be incapacitated for the rest of the year. I made an excuse to take a break. How could his leg be that lucky? Everyone on his team has a permanent grin on. They’ve won so much money from the rest of us, we have no money to even buy a drink anymore.”

I stare ahead in silence so he asked “Do you miss Chang An?” I lightly nodded and he quietly said “Not me. I’d rather not go back and prefer to fight a lifetime of wars in the Northwest.” He laughed in a sad way “I know it’s never going to happen, but even my dreams are all her. I’m afraid to say anything, just keeping it in my heart. That one character “Li” appeared to have burrowed itself in my heart. Is it because I can never have her that makes this longing impossible to shake? When I was fighting the Xiong Nu, I thought that death could be an escape, and I actually fell in love with war. In the past it was for family honor and glory, but now I crave that feeling of being at the brink of life and death. Which is when I can forget her.”

I ruefully ask “An entire lifetime without being about to forget someone? Even when you try you can’t forget?” He furrowed his brows “Did I try hard to forget her? Was I trying to forget her, or trying to remember her?” I felt like we each had our own thoughts and was actually talking around each other, so I shook the thoughts from my head and smiled “Before you deployed, did she say anything to you, or mention me?”

He looked dazed and smiled “One day I was in the Palace and happened to run into her. After bowing, she said “the battlefield is danger, please be careful”. I know it was just polite language because she knew I was off to fight the Xiong Nu, but that made me so happy.” I looked at him, thinking that the encounter must’ve have been orchestrated by Li Yan to appear to be a random encounter. I ask again if she mentioned me and Li Gan said she did not.

Zhao Puo Nu came to get Li Gan “My lord Li, everyone is looking for you! General Huo said that if you’re afraid to keep losing, you can be on his team. He guarantees you’ll win all your money back and then some.” Li Gan coldly huffed “I let him win a few rounds and he thinks I’m really afraid of him! Let’s go! Don’t forget that in the past my reputation at football far exceeded my reputation at archery.”

Li Gan turned to me with a smile “You don’t want to come watch him play? He’s reknown in Chang An for being especially handsome and dashing when playing, totally different than his usual cold silent persona.” I hesitated and then shook my head “You go, everyone is waiting for you!”

On my way back to the tent, I pass by the football field. Huo Qu Bing ordered the regular soldiers not to leave their posts to watch, but there was still quite a lot of spectators gathered around. From far away I can hear the gambling, the fighting, the catcalling. I laughed. If Sun Zi saw this kind of general leading his troops and turning the army base into a gambling den, he’d probably be so pissed he’d crawl out of his grave.

I had planned to circle around, but then remembered what Li Gan said and got curious. I decided to find a quiet spot to watch, not quite sure in

what way Huo Qu Bing could be even more handsome and dashing. I found a spot when someone walked up to me “The Great General Wei was a strict leader, what must he think to see this scene?” I sighed, I guess I can’t avoid it. “If General Gong Xun isn’t happy with Huo Qu Bing, then you can tell him directly. It’s no use talking to me about it.”

He smiled until his eyes crinkled together “People say that a wise wife would make a family free of peril. Even though you are just a woman who has no official title to Qu Bing, but you should still...” He wanted to keep lecturing and nagging, but a football whizzed through the air and almost hit the back of his head. He had to kick it back into the field and thus stopped nagging.

Huo Qu Bing, with a gold circlet around his hair, wearing a white robe that is embroidered with a gold dragon, stands right there. He’s tall and broad, with such a magnetic aura, like a warrior god from the Heavens. Seeing him, one who lament and wonder how this Heavenly creature fell from the skies and ended up here on earth. He had a slight smile and was giving Gong Xun Aou a goofy look “General Gong Xun, that was an accidental kick, I do apologize! Since you’re quite good, come down and play a few rounds with us” Gong Xun Aou wanted to decline but already someone was dragging him down.

Huo Qu Bing ran to my side as Gong Xun Aou was changing, whispering in a laughing voice “This round I will be on the same team as Li Gan. I promise we’ll kick Gong Xun Aou six-ways to Sunday, so he no longer has any energy to annoy us anymore.” Li Gan ran over and gave Huo Qu Bing a high five followed by a fist bump, both of them turning to look at Gong Xun Aou with an expression like a wolf spotting a bunny. I used to wonder how these two guys, with such different personalities, could be such good friends. Seeing them like this, I realized they’ve probably pulled these devilish deeds plenty of times before.

Li Gan laughed “Dear younger sister-in-law, thank goodness you came, otherwise Qu Bing this bastard would feel bad making Gong Xun Aou play.” My face turned bright red and I humphed “What nonsense are you talking about?” Li Gan innocently looked at Huo Qu Bing “Did I say something wrong?” Huo Qu Bing laughed and shook his head “Not at all.

That was absolutely right.”

I shake my sleeve and move to leave but Huo Qu Bing quickly grabs me. I see the other soldiers are staring at me so I quickly stop and act all serious “Go kick your silly football and stop standing here pushing and pulling.” Huo Qu Bing quickly stepped back. Li Gan pointed at Huo Qu Bing and started guffawing, while Huo Qu Bing just coldly glared at him. Li Gan raised his hands to indicate he was sorry, but he couldn’t stop laughing. Huo Qu Bing sent a flying kick towards him, which Li Gan blocked because he was already anticipating it. He took off laughing.

Gong Xun Aou is done changing and the game begins. Huo Qu Bing turns to give me one last smile before composing himself and running back in the field. This is my first time watching football and I have no clue what the rules are. I don’t know what is good, what is bad, and I could care less who wins. I just stare at Huo Qu Bing.

He’s like the son of the wind. His movements are light and effortless, constantly changing. Sometimes its powerful and smooth like a dragon, other times gentle and airy like a crane. He’s like a priceless sword, one quick movement that no one can block, with a seamless stroke and he has destroyed his opponent yet he is still pristine white.

Under the brilliant sun, he’s so beautiful that it stuns my heart. All around us is the thunderous cheer of the spectators. But everything disappears in my ears. My world is completely silent, and in the silence there is only his form seemingly flying through the wind. In that moment, I know that in my entire life, I will never forget what I have seen today. Even when all my hair turns white and my eyes can no longer see, I will still be able to describe in vivid detail his each and every single movement.

Chapter 24: Brilliant Smile

“I won’t enter the city with you. I’ll go in first.” Huo Qu Bing thought and agreed “Fine. There is bound to be a lot of confusion upon entering the city, and I need to enter the Palace to see the Emperor first. Are you going back to Luo Yu House?” I sighed “Where else can I go? Hong Gu is sure to berate me to death.”

Huo Qu Bing looked amused “You are the one at fault, if you get yelled at you deserve it. But if you want some peace and quiet, you can always go to my estate directly. Housekeeper Chen will take good care of you. From now on, my home is your home. Luo Yu House won’t be the only place you can go in Chang An.”

I shook my head “It’s time to face the music, isn’t that what you said? I can’t avoid it forever, and if Hong Gu knew I was back in Chang An and I didn’t go see her, I would commit an additional grievous infraction.” Huo Qu Bing smiled and nodded “Finally. Here’s the brave Jin Yu I know.”

After half a year away, Chang An appears not to have changed at all. Crowds of people are coming from the city gates towards the road leading to the Palace. They all want to see the man responsible for instilling fear in the Xiong Nu, Huo Qu Bing, as well as the captured Xiong Nu princes and dukes. I am moving against the flow of traffic and I break a sweat. It takes me three times as long to arrive at Luo Yu House.

The door is open a crack and the two doormen are sitting under the shade staying cool. They are drinking tea and chatting. I walk in and they scramble up “Young master, if you want to watch dancing you have to go through the front door. This is for the servants to use.” I laughed and cocked my head “You can’t recognize me?” They stared at me and quickly bowed “We heard Madam was out on a business trip and we apologize for not recognizing you right away.”

The yard is filled with shady trees and I can see the sparkling lake, giving off a cool breeze. Xing Yen is sweeping the courtyard and I go stand

next to her. She startled and looked at me, stunned for a moment before starting to scream. I had to plug my ears and I tease her "Stop sweeping and prepare some water for me. I need a bath, it's so hot today." She nodded and went off.

Before the water arrived, Hong Gu is storming into my room. One hand is on her waist and another had a finger pointing at me "You ungrateful, heartless, cruel....." Xing Yen passed me a bowl of cold green bean soup and neither of us dare to speak, only glancing at each other. I listen to Hong Gu berate me and drink my soup ".....how can you be so heartless, leaving us weak ladies all without a by-your-leave, not caring about whether we live or die, not caring about our friendship.....All this time, I've been praying daily and hoping nightly....."

I finish my soup while Hong Gu keeps yelling at me. After listen some more, I finally can't resist and laugh. Her eyes are red "How can you laugh?" I reply "It's just that you're making me sound like a faithless boyfriend who deserted you." She thought about it and couldn't help but smile, but then she started crying and I had to comfort her "Hong Gu, this time it's all my fault."

Hong Gu wiped her tears "Xiao Yu, I'm not angry because you left. There isn't a party in this world that doesn't end. The girls come and go here many cycles already, and there will be a day when you'll leave. I was hoping you can marry someone and live a peaceful life. But you really shouldn't have left without saying anything, just leaving a letter. Not even a face to face farewell. You might be a carefree person but I'm not."

I walked up and held her hand "I do things based on my own whim, and I didn't consider your feelings. I won't do that again. Please chalk this up to my youthful folly and forgive me this once."

Hong Gu glared at me and then finally smiled after a few moments. "I heard General Huo returned to the city today. How coincidental you also returned to the city today?" I was like a girl who just had her personal life splashed open like a book. I demurely lower my head and didn't answer her. Hong Gu looked at my countenance and suddenly understood. She

tightly grasped my hand and happily asked “You and General Huo....you and him.....is it for real?”

I laugh and pull my hand free, turning around to look for a change of clothes. I still don’t answer but Hong Gu claps her hands “Oh yes! Oh yes! I can finally stop worrying. Hurray for running away! Three cheers for leaving! This runaway trip was totally worth it.”

I was behind the panel bathing when Hong Gu stood on the other side to talk to me “.....Xiao Yu, thanks to you running away, I actually got to meet the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises. I couldn’t have imagined it was such a handsome young man. His every word was gentle and refined, and he was so polite to everyone.....”

Bam! The water ladle in my hand fell on the floor and Hong Gu quickly asked what happened? I pick up the ladle and continue bathing “Nothing, just accidentally dropped the ladle. What did the Big Boss want with you?”

Hong Gu huffed “Of course it was because of you. He wanted to know all the details of you leaving. Because of what you asked, I burned the letter and didn’t mention it. But I was so angry at you then, and I could care less who could find you and bring you back so I could yell at you. So I told the Big Boss that you left a letter for General Huo, which I had already sent to his estate.”

Did he need to ask how I left Chang An? Since he already didn’t care, why did he have to constantly do these little things that make him appear to care? I splashed more water over my head, as if I could wash things away. “Hong Gu, tell everyone who saw me to keep quiet about the fact that I’ve returned.”

Hong Gu happily agreed “Fine! Rest for a few days, but don’t forget to enter the Palace to personally thank Consort Li. When you were gone, she didn’t visit personally but would send Master Li to play songs here. This helped deflect a lot of potential problems. She is very loyal. Others would try to shake off their inglorious past, but she is a caring person and

knew you were gone and helped take care of us.”

I stood there in a daze. In the future.....what to do? Li Yan, I know your pain and your sorrow, which is why I don't want to hurt you. But in the end must I pick a side? I chatted with Hong Gu some more and the time flies. It's nighttime already and she tells me to rest after we finish dinner.

Perhaps it's spending all my time with Huo Qu Bing these past few months, but suddenly I feel a sense of loneliness being by myself. My brain keeps thinking all these random thoughts. Since I couldn't sleep, I snuck out of the house and went to the Huo Estate. The moment I leaped over the wall and landed, a few black dogs have surrounded me. They sniff and confirm that I am welcome so they depart.

Compared to the hustle and bustle on the streets of Chang An during the daytime, the Huo Estate is unusually quiet. Huo Qu Bing's room is completely dark, looks like he's still in the Palace. I lightly open the door and go in. The room has clearly been just cleaned, with fresh incense and grapes on a plate still glistening water drops. I open the window to let in the night breeze, making it much cooler. I arrange a cushion and lean on the window sill, eating grapes and looking at the full moon outside.

The moon has already reached the center and Huo Qu Bing still hasn't returned. I grumbled, he shouldn't be in the Palace until so late, so did he get dragged elsewhere to drink? But with his personality, who can possibly drag him anywhere?

I'm can't hold off my sleepiness and drowsily nod off. Right when I'm blissfully in dream heaven, I hear people talking. I quickly jump up and hide myself. Huo Qu Bing walks in with a maid trailing him. She doesn't even light the lamp before noticing the state of the room and getting down her knees to beg forgiveness, bowing her head on the floor. Huo Qu Bing takes a look at the half eaten grapes and the messy cushions strewn around and he smiles. But his voice is still cold when he tells her that she can leave.

After he's alone, he lays down on the pallet and teases “We're alone,

you can come out now.” I walk out from behind the panel and he smiles and waves me over to sit next to him. I ask “Why so late?” He just stared at me and didn’t answer, his eyes twinkling with mirth. In the beginning I was fine looking him in the eyes, but gradually I feel self conscious and my heart beats faster. I quickly look outside.

He suddenly wrenched me into his embrace and I was caught unawares. “What are you doing?” struggling to get up. He held me and wouldn’t let go “Be good and just lay still, let me tell you something. I missed you while I was in the Palace, so I didn’t drink much and quickly left. Afterwards I went to Luo Yu House to find you, but your room was dark and you weren’t there. At that time, I thought.....I wasn’t very happy. So later I went somewhere to sit alone, and there I thought about all sorts of things. That is why I’m home so late. But who knew it was all my own doing.” He lightly caressed my hair and murmured in a low voice “I’m too arrogant, believing there is very little I can’t handle. I always refuse to admit my own fears and concerns. I ought not be telling you this, but I feel like I owe you for doubting you. I shouldn’t have been overthinking these things, so I didn’t want to keep this from you.”

I felt these conflicting emotions. He said that Chang An has hurt me, but he was also hurt here. He didn’t tell me exactly what he had been thinking of, so can I accept his apology so candidly? I sniffed his shoulder and then slapped his hand away “What heavy scent of makeup. I wonder who made it? If you like it so much, I should start using this brand as well.”

Huo Qu Bing sat up and quickly explained “It was the dancing girls in the Palace, they got close when they were presenting wine.” I coldly scoffed “Is that right? Didn’t you say you went somewhere by yourself for a long time?” He flicked me lightly on the forehead and laughed “Are you jealous right now?” I glared at him but he just pulled me into his embrace again while I tried to push him off “What if I’m jealous? From now on, if you smell like someone else’s makeup, I don’t want you to appear before me.”

He let me go but his eyes were still twinkling “It doesn’t matter, I just like it.” I huffed “You’re sick!” He crossed his hands behind his head and laid down “If this is an illness, I hope to be sick everyday.”

I cannot possibly be more shameless than him, so I stop bickering with him. He laughed “Too bad it’s already so late, so tomorrow morning I’ll take you somewhere.” I stood up “Then I’m going home, you come get me tomorrow. He quickly grabbed my hand “In a few more hours the sun will rise, why go back and forth? Spend the night here and I’ll give you some space on the pallet.” I thought about it and nodded my head.

I always thought I didn’t need much sleep, but compared to Huo Qu Bing, my energy level is nothing. It’s still dark outside and he’s already shaking me. I’m feeling lazy so I refuse to get up, pleading “Whatever you want me to see, it can wait until the sun rises, I’m so sleepy, let me sleep awhile longer.” He kept trying to wake me up but I kept trying to burrow deeper into the blanket and covered my head with it so I can’t hear him anywhere. He sat for a few moments and then opened the door to shout “Servants, bring the morning wash!”

I quickly sat up and he teased me “You’re not scared of me, but you’re scared of the maids in my house?” He saw me giving him the stink eye and he quickly closed the door. “You can sleep anytime, but a sunrise is only once a day.”

The entire mountain side is covered in Lover’s Vines. Breezy layers with a soft fragrance, the green glistening in the hillside. Gold and silver colors peek out from the fog like it’s dancing. In this quiet morning, it’s so beautiful it appears right out of a dream, and so fragile it might shatter if you touch it.

The moment the sun hits the mountain top, the fog dissipates and the colors burst into life. The gold flows while the silver dances, turning the entire mountain into a glorious treasure of gold and silver. “This is worth getting up for, right?” Huo Qu Bing asked with a smile. I’m staring at everything in a daze. He holds my hand and we slowly stroll underneath the Lover’s Vines. He said in a pleased tone “I knew you’d be stunned into silence. When I saw this last night, I was totally shocked. It was planted only last Fall and who knew it would turn out so beautiful?”

I was coming out of my daze and purposely want to annoy him

“What’s so special about this? It’s not like you planted it.” He didn’t get upset and instead very happily said “I knew you would say that, so I saved this for last.” He pointed to an entire patch to the North “I planted that entire area. As a replacement for you, it’s more than enough.”

The Lover’s Vines are twinkling and smiling under the bright sunlight, so eye-catching, but nowhere near as brilliant as his smile at this very moment. It’s warmth and light seems to sweep away every shadow lurking in the heart.

I suddenly cup my hands around my mouth and holler into the canyon “I’m very happy! Very happy!” Huo Qu Bing startled for a moment and then his entire face was all smiles and he also shouted into the canyon “I’m also very happy!” Our two “very happy, very happy” seemed to reverberate and bounce around the mountain, slowly blending together. He laughed and picked me up, twirling me around the flowers. I can’t help myself and start laughing, and our laughter also echoed through the canyons, dancing through an entire mountain of Lover’s Vines.

Chapter 25: Emotional Turmoil

I had been kneeling for a hour already and Li Yan still hasn't said a word. I thought to myself that this impasse can't continue, so I bow my head to the floor "Your highness seeks to see me for what matter?"

Li Yan's coldness dissipates and I see a tinge of sadness "Jin Yu, how could this happen? When I was told about it, I couldn't believe it. Wasn't the person you liked Meng Jiu of Shi Enterprises? You promised me. Yet now you are with Huo Qu Bing. Are you planning on marrying him?"

"I'm sorry, I...I...." I could only bow my head "No matter what, I will never reveal your background. It will be like I have never heard of it." Li Yan coldly laughed "What if Huo Qu Bing wants to oppose Buo Er?" I raised my head to look at her "I don't want to call you "Your Highness." Li Yan, I am saying this as your friend. Please give up the plan to put your son on the throne. Your life is already so difficult, how can you endure knowing you are putting your child through the same thing?"

Li Yan stared at me "I ask you this, if one day Huo Qu Bing wanted to hurt us, will you help him?" I replied "If you don't intend to harm the Crown Prince, then Huo Qu Bing will have no reason to harm you. And me....I will not let you hurt Huo Qu Bing."

Li Yan started laughing "Jin Yu, you can leave now. From this day forward, we walk our own paths. But you have to remember your oath. The Heavens have a good memory." She has someone she wants to protect, I have someone I want to protect, and we have finally reached this point. I silently give her a bow and leave.

Hong Gu had the kitchen prepare my favorite dishes but I have no appetite. I ask Hong Gu if she's shuttered the other businesses like I asked, and she says it's in process but can't be hurried. I tell her to inform the girls in the dancing houses to be more low key, and I also plan to quietly find a buyer for the dancing houses as well.

Hong Gu asked “Xiao Yu, what happened? I can’t imagined anyone you might be afraid of in Chang An now? General Huo will not let anyone mistreat you, and even Consort Li’s presence means others will not dare to harass us.” I reply “I’ve overturned the boat with Consort Li. You know Li Yan’s calculating nature. Even with Qu Bing protecting me, if Li Yan gets the tiniest bit of opportunity and she fans the flames, things could get out of control. The way the Emperor dotes on Li Yan, if he chooses to punish us, I might be able to get away, but you all will.....Li Yan is not the same person she was before she entered the Palace. Now she would not blink an eye to see the loss of a few lives.”

I remembered hearing the soldiers criticizing Luo Yu House in the army base that day “Hong Gu, Luo Yu House seems to be doing well on the surface, but in truth we have offended quite a lot of people. With the Princess behind us, people have tempered their grievances. But if Li Yan decides to attack us, she will bring forth all those feelings, and it will only impact the girls here. I would love to immediately close down the dancing house, but that would leave all the girls out on the street. If I don’t handle this properly, I won’t be able to make sure they will be alright.”

Hong Gu looked stunned “How could this have happened?” I shook my head and smiled ruefully “A person’s calculations can never beat the Heaven’s machinations. I could have never predicted we’d be in this position today.”

.....

Yi Zhi Xie gets wind that two of his tribal leaders have decided to switch their allegiance to the Han dynasty. He immediately sends someone to talk them out of it, and one tribal leader is swayed and gives up his intention. That causes a dispute with the other tribal leader and a battle breaks out. The tribal leader who wants to go to the Han kills the other leader who decided to stay with the Xiong Nu, and this causes soldiers to switch sides and a bitter civil war to break out.

News reaches the Han army which is still on the road, and Zhao Puo Nu suggests waiting until the Xiong Nu have killed each other before

swooping in. Huo Qu Bing rejects this safer course of action. The Han dynasty has always treated those who surrender well. If the tribal leader does want to surrender and the Han dynasty refuses to help him, then it will strike hesitation and worry into the hearts of future opponents considering switching allegiances to the Han. He ignores the objections of the court officials and takes ten thousand men to cross the Yellow River and charge into a Xiong Nu army base with over forty thousand Xiong Nu soldiers.

Huo Qu Bing shows the courage and valor of one against many, once again using fewer soldiers to defeat a larger force. With yet another seemingly impossible victory, Huo Qu Bing cements his reputation within the Xiong Nu as a warrior god who cannot be defeated. So many Xiong Nu fear him that if they even hear his name, they turn and run away. Huo Qu Bing successfully saves the tribal leader, and then orders him to execute his soldiers who defected and turned against him. The flying blood and the rolling heads finally caused all the Xiong Nu to put down their weapons and end this civil war.

Huo Qu Bing sends soldiers to escort the tribal leader and his family members to Chang An while he waits for Liu Che's orders. He settles the forty thousand surrendered Xiong Nu soldiers first before returning to Chang An. Liu Che rewards the tribal leader and his generals, giving them official titles and wealth in Chang An. The surrendered Xiong Nu forces are placed around the Long Xi region and he builds forts in the Qi Lian Mountains. With that, the Xiong Nu's presence in the Yellow River and the Desert South regions are completely wiped out, and another path to Xi Yu has been opened up.

Liu Che greatly rewards Huo Qu Bing for his success in this foray. When Huo Qu Bing returns to Chang An, Liu Che personally leaves Chang An to welcome him back right outside the gates of the city. He gives Huo Qu Bing so much wealth that he has now way surpassed the Great General Wei, and becomes the most honored man in court.

It's already Fall but the weather hasn't cooled down. I lay on the pallet, with my eyes closed, fanning myself with a fan decorated with a beautiful woman on it's face. Someone sat down next to me, but I kept my eyes closed and continued to ignore him. He leaned down to kiss me and I

blocked him with my fan, so he ended up kissing the beauty on the fan. He stared at me with annoyance and resignation, so I turned over and asked the fan “Is she prettier than me?”

Huo Qu Bing laughed “I don’t know if she’s prettier, but she sure is more affectionate than you. I haven’t seen you in so long and you don’t even know how to welcome me back with hugs and kisses.” I huffed and used the fan to cover my face, continuing to ignore him.

He leaned in to whisper in my ear “What’s wrong with you? How come you’re so dispirited?” I dramatically sigh “I’m pretending to be a disgruntled housewife, a pining housewife. Can’t you tell?”

“Stop lolling around on the pallet, you’re becoming lazier. Go out with me.” He smiled and took the fan away, tossing it to the side and pulling me up. “You’re getting better at making stuff up. I arrive in Chang An and immediately hear from Housekeeper Chen that Luo Yu House apparently is quickly divesting all its businesses. Not sure what you’re up to, but you seemed to have pinned it on me.”

Since returning to Chang An, because of my worries, other than going to the Palace to see Li Yan, I stay home and rarely venture out on the streets. But since Huo Qu Bing is so eager and I don’t want to dampen his mood, I force myself up and leave the house with him.

We sit at a window table in Yi Ping Ju, with a pot of tea and some snacks, casually conversing. He laughs to discuss the origin of the “wine spring” and how it got that name. When the Emperor rewarded wine, there was too many people there and not enough to go around. So Huo Qu Bing poured the wine into the spring so everyone can partake of the Emperor’s wine, so the spring got the name “wine spring.” The entire area also got coined that name, and the original Xiong Nu name got tossed aside.

I laugh “So the spring actually tasted like wine?” He sipped his tea and said “The Emperor’s wine can’t possibly be ordinary. If everyone said they tasted wine, then the spring must’ve been scented with wine.”

He reached over to wipe some crumbs from my mouth, but since there were other customers in the restaurant, I was embarrassed and ducked my head and wiped it myself. He didn't touch my face, but instead reached for my hand. I tried pulling it out of his grasp but he wouldn't let go, so I just pouted and let him be. Huo Qu Bing smiled, his eyes as gentle as water, when suddenly his entire demeanor seemed to shift.

He still smiled, but his smile turned rather brittle. I curiously follow the direction of his gaze, and it was like getting smacked by a large object on my heart. I felt a current of pain pass through and my mind blanks as I'm rooted to the spot.

Jiu Ye, with his face ashen, is staring at my entwined hands with Huo Qu Bing's. His expression reveals his disbelief. I'm so shocked that my first instinct is to retract my hand, but Huo Qu Bing tightly grips it and refuses to let go. It's like a steel vise pressing into my flesh, and the pain makes my heart jerk but clears my head. I quietly let Huo Qu Bing hold my hand, sitting there without moving.

Shi Feng looked at Jiu Ye and then looked at me "Big sister Yu, you.....when did you return to Chang An? Did you know Jiu Ye..... Hearing the rumors that you had returned to Chang An, none of us could believe that you are with....."

Jiu Ye, with a soft voice, decisively cut off Xiao Feng's sentence "It's good knowing you are fine." His face had a fleeting smile, but it's clear that his heart is filled with untold anguish. I casually replied "I'm sorry to cause you worry." Huo Qu Bing smiled "Brother Meng, why don't you join us and have some tea?" Jiu Ye wanted to decline but Tian Cao quickly agreed.

Shi Feng looked upset and gave me multiple angry glares, and a few huffy looks at Huo Qu Bing. Jiu Ye, his face still white, appeared to have regained his composure. With a smile he toasted Huo Qu Bing and casually chatted about random things. But the moment his gaze brushed over me, he would immediately avoid me, not looking me once in the eyes.

I kept my head lowered staring at the bamboo floor underneath the

table. Huo Qu Bing continued to hold my hand, and all I felt was waves of icy yet burning sensation in my heart. I said to Huo Qu Bing “Let’s go home!” He looked at me, his eyes full of pain and pity, let go of my hand and lightly nodded his head.

“Jin Yu, what a coincidence! I was planning to visit you in the next few days.” Li Guang Li and a few of his rich playboy friends sauntered into the restaurant. He greeted me before noticing Huo Qu Bing. The other guys immediately stopped their goofy grins and quickly greeted Huo Qu Bing. Only Li Guang Li looked like he didn’t care, and even looked somewhat boastful and arrogant. He made a fist greeting to Huo Qu Bing “General Huo, what a surprise.” Huo Qu Bing ignored him without even a look, and appeared not to have heard him at all.

I laughed “I was just heading home. Come by the House if you need to see me about anything!” Li Guang Li kept giving me these laughing looks, getting me all confused. “What’s going on?” He bit his lip and looked a little bit embarrassed “Nothing, you’ll know in a few days.”

Huo Qu Bing shot Li Guang Li a freezing look, causing Li Guang Li to immediately turn away. But Li Guang Li suddenly got his courage up and turned back to looked at Huo Qu Bing, who had already moved on. Huo Qu Bing pined his eyes on me, indicting that we should leave now. Li Guang Li couldn’t get an upper hand, so he turned to look at me, displaying a pleased look.

Li Guang Li is someone who can’t keep a secret, and right now he’s actually exceedingly odd. Because of Li Yan, I can’t ignore this, so I try to goad him “Second brother Li is usually so forthright in how you handle yourself. Why are you suddenly all missish today? You’re acting more shy than a virgin bride about to get married.”

The other playboys started to laugh and quickly stopped themselves, but Li Guang Li’s face turned bright red and he hollered “It’s not that I don’t want to say it, just that my sister asked me earlier not to.” My heart was flip-flopping so I laugh “If her highness asked you not to, you obviously are afraid to, then I won’t press you further” and I made a move

to leave.

“Who says I don’t dare?” Li Guang Li walked up to me, hesitated for a moment and looked elsewhere, afraid to meet my eyes “Sister said that she asked the Emperor to bestow marriage for me....to you.”

Jiu Ye, who had seemingly been casually drinking tea and not paying attention to the earlier conversation, suddenly dropped his cup and it shattered on the ground. He turned to stare at Li Guang Li. Huo Qu Bing appeared to have heard the funniest joke in the entire world, startling for a moment before bursting into laughter.

Li Guang Li looked shaken and quickly avoided Jiu Ye’s stare. When he saw Huo Qu Bing’s reaction, he appeared torn. Shi Feng yelled out “You’re a toad wanting to eat swan’s meat!” (i.e. he’s coveting something he doesn’t deserve).

Everything happened so fast I was rooted to the spot thinking of what to do. With Shi Feng’s yelling, it shook me out of my thoughts and I chided him “Xiao Feng, apologize immediately.” I have never spoken so harshly to Xiao Feng before, and he gave me a hurt look.

Jiu Ye smiled and calmly said “Apologies are only necessary when one did something wrong. Xiao Feng did nothing wrong, why apologize?” Huo Qu Bing nodded and coldly added “My sentiments exactly.”

I can’t believe the two of them are actually agreeing right now. I don’t want to escalate things so I turn and bow apologetically to Li Guang Li, who was red with embarrassment and glaring at Jiu Ye and Huo Qu Bing. He stormed off and I turned back to stomp my foot at Huo Qu Bing “Li Guang Li is a softie inside, if we ask nicely he won’t agree to this. Now you’ve made him want to do it because of his pride.”

Huo Qu Bing looked dismissive and coldly huffed “Ask him nicely? If you weren’t here, I would have ripped his head off on the spot.” I give a resigned sigh but Huo Qu Bing was already dragging me out of there “Let’s

go see the Emperor right now to clear this up. Consort Li....good one.....humph!"

In the rush, I was afraid to look back, but I know that a pair of eyes are trained on my back. I was distracted so I trip on a small door ledge and Huo Qu Bing immediately supports me. He turned back and met Jiu Ye's eyes, one cold and one warm, neither of them moving to avoid each other's pointed stares. It felt like sparks were going off around me, so I quickly squeezed out a smile and grabbed Huo Qu Bing's elbow and we left Yi Ping Ju.

We had barely stepped foot in the Palace and didn't even see the Emperor when a middle-aged Palace lady stopped us and bowed to Huo Qu Bing. He was anxious to see the Emperor, but calmed down when he saw her "This is the Palace maid who serves the Empress. When I was small I called her Auntie Yun, but she refuses to let me call her that anymore. You can call her that for me from now on!" I quickly bow "Auntie Yun."

Auntie Yun smiled "Yu Er? Last time General Huo spoke with the Empress at length about you. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

Huo Qu Bing's expression got colder again while Auntie Yun grabbed my hand "Come greet the Empress first, she's also been wanting to meet you."

In a bamboo pavilion, with the chrysanthemums blooming white and yellow scenting the entire garden, a gentle breeze blows through the garden. We slow down our steps and Auntie Yun calls out "Your highness." Empress Wei waits until we bow to her and then points to some seats, telling us to sit down.

Empress Wei sat across from me and studied me carefully. She sighed "Being with Qu Bing, it must be hard on you." Huo Qu Bing spoke up "I won't let it be hard on her." Empress Wei had a small smile "The Emperor did not agree to marry her to Li Guang Li."

Huo Qu Bing smiled “I’ll go thank the Emperor in a bit then. I didn’t get a chance to ask the Emperor for this marriage, but he knows how I feel about Jin Yu. Years ago he even teased me, saying that if I couldn’t win her by myself, he’ll go steal her for me.”

Empress Wei had a pitying look in her eyes “The Emperor is going to decide your marriage, but.....but it’s not with Jin Yu.” Huo Qu Bing jumped up “Other than Jin Yu, I do not want anyone else.” Empress Wei continued “The Emperor will agree to let you make Jin Yu your concubine, but she cannot be your wife.”

It’s almost dusk and a pair of swallows are circling above, their shadows sprayed on the table. I lower my head and count the bamboo strips on the table top, one, two, five....how many did I count to? I start over again, one, three, two.....

Huo Qu Bing was about to drag me out of there, but Empress Wei softly said “Qu Bing, this is more complicated than the battlefield. You can’t just swing your sword and kill your way out of here. Aren’t you afraid that you’ll do something that ends up harming Jin Yu.”

Huo Qu Bing stopped and sat back down “What does the Emperor intend?” Empress Wei explained “Why does the Emperor place you in such high favor? These recent deployments, he’s given you the military power, and every time you emerge victorious he rewards you greatly. Within two years, your position is almost pressing up against your uncle.”

Huo Qu Bing was quiet and didn’t respond. Liu Che has been wary of Wei Qing’s almost unfettered military power, and has been looking for the chance to divert Wei Qing’s armed forces. But not anyone can match up to Wei Qing, and the appearance of Huo Qu Bing has given him the perfectly opportunity to finally do so. Even better, Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing’s personalities are diametrically opposite from each other, and Liu Che actually gets along better with Huo Qu Bing. So Liu Che is purposely diverting Wei Qing’s power to Huo Qu Bing and splitting the military into two factions, which will also further drive a wedge between Wei Qing and Huo Qu Bing.

Empress Wei waved her hand and swept from petals from the table
“The Emperor wants to marry a princess to you.”

Years ago, Liu Che needed Wei Qing to help him battle the forces of the Bao family and the Wang family. But after those families were defeated, Wei Qing’s power and esteem continued to grow in court, things naturally shifted to account for that. Why did Wei Qing marry a princess many years older than him? The real reason no one can be certain. So many years have passed, and now it is Huo Qu Bing who is being asked once again to marry a princess.

The sun was setting, a giant red circle in the sky, shining over the three of us silently sitting there.

Huo Qu Bing raised his head and looked at the wild geese in the sky
“Because of Uncle’s precedent, I’ve been as cautious as possible. Yet.....”
He turned and gave me a warm smile “Other than you, I’m not marrying anyone else, princess or no princess.” Empress Wei raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Huo Qu Bing bowed to the Empress and then took my hand and led me out. Empress Wei sighed softly, saying nothing and lowering her head down to her zither, strumming it. The sound of the zither rose and fell like the wind, a sorrow permeating the entire yard. Looking out, a waning sun illuminates a few falling petals floating in the wind.

.....

The solitary moonlight in this dark night, a few fireflies glowing, the leaves slowly falling without a sound. My heart is as somber as this night, how can a few fireflies illuminate my future? I stand still for quite some time before suddenly getting up to chase the fireflies. My sleeves fluttering in the wind, the moment I capture a light, I immediately release it.

“Yu Er.....” the voice is soft and gentle, as if he’s afraid of startling this night scene. My heart shook and I immediately stopping moving, but I

can't turn my head around.

What is he doing here? I used to hope day and night for this moment, to one day hear his voice in this courtyard. But too much time has passed, my pain has lessened and I've since given up on this hope. Yet this voice spoke up now right behind me. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Yu Er, I.....I'm sorry." Jiu Ye, using his crutch, walked up to me. "I.....I want to ask you to forgive me. Can you give me another chance?" My entire heart was thrown for a loop and I stare incredulously at him. "What did you say? I don't understand what you just said."

He entire face is filled with sorrow but his eyes are burning with intensity that scalds me until my heart hurts "My mistake was thinking I knew what was best, and never telling you what was really inside my heart. I made the decision on what was best for both of us, but I never asked you whether my decision was correct? And was it what you wanted? Yu Er, I do like you, you have always been in my heart."

This is just so ludicrous. These words that I once would have exchanged my life to hear, but today, it only fills me with anger and sadness. I can't help it and start laughing out loud "Jiu Ye, stop teasing me. I've already agreed to marry Huo Qu Bing."

He gripped his crutch tightly and his face was white, but his words are unwavering "You haven't married him yet. And right now he's holding so much military power, and with his complicated family situation, his marriage isn't just any ordinary marriage anymore. It will be decided based on political gain and risk, and it's not something he can singlehandedly decide. Yu Er, it was all my fault before, but this time I don't want to miss another chance."

I stand there is a daze. How could this be happening? In the past I prayed and prayed and it never came true, so how did it all change now?

Jiu Ye's hand reached over to brush a leaf off my forehead and his

face lightly brushed my cheek. I bluntly turn my face to avoid his hand so he quickly withdrew it.

My initial shock has worn off a bit and I've regained some clarity, so I take a step back and harden my heart to say "Jiu Ye, I've.....Qu Bing and I.....I'm already his."

He was stunned for a moment, with all these conflicted emotions, before smiling without a care "Did you forget my grandfather's story? My grandmother was someone else's concubine before marrying my grandfather. Do you think I will care about this?"

I'm so shocked that I keep shaking my head and murmuring "Then why? Why did you do what you did in the past....."

Jiu Ye took two steps towards me and stared at me "Yu Er, initially I was worried about my family situation. Since grandfather established the Shi Enterprises, most of our earnings are spent helping the people of Xi Yu or helping those kingdoms strengthen their military might to guard against Han expansion. When the business fell into my hands, I've tried to distance myself from Xi Yu but there are still so many connections there. If this information was ever to leak out, my head rolling on the floor would be the quickest punishment that can happen. I knew I should have kept my distance from you, but I couldn't help myself and did try to test whether you could accept me like this."

I bit my lip "And I didn't pass your test?" He shook his head "You passed. Way beyond my expectations." I was confused so I looked at him "You are simply too wonderful, causing me to feel like I wasn't good enough for you, and could never give you the happiness you deserve. So I arrogantly drew an emotional line to keep you outside."

How in the world can there be an explanation like this? I coldly laugh and he quickly grabs my hand. I shake him off and pain flashed through his eyes. He lowered his head to say "Yu Er, my physical handicap, it's not just my leg. I also.....I also cannot have kids. I cannot give you a normal family."

He smiled bitterly "It's not that I can't consummate a marriage, it's just that my offspring will inherit my physical condition which is hard to survive into adulthood. My mother gave birth to five kids, and I'm the only one who survived to adulthood. Four out of the five kids had a physical handicap. My parents died early partly because they couldn't deal with the emotional pain of losing their children. After I studied medicine, I investigated my mother's side of the family and discovered that she was the only child of my grandmother's who survived. My grandmother also died early because she couldn't deal with the loss. I've grown up under this spectre of my parents sorrow. Watching my mother happily get pregnant each time and then watching her painfully losing a child each time. I don't want this to repeat itself."

So he kept rejecting me over and over because of this? Why did he think I was like other women out there who need to have children? Does one need children to be happy? Why didn't he ask me what I wanted?

I was filled with a hundred different emotions, my heart hurting so much. He actually laughed at himself, so I reached out and started hitting him. My hands landed on his shoulder, his chest "Why.....why didn't you tell me this earlier? Would I care about these things? All I cared about was you!"

He stood there without moving, allowing me to hit him over and over again. My heart was in so much pain that I felt the strength in my arms slowly seep away. My body shakes and I have no more energy to hit him. I loosen my fisted hands while my tears start to fall uncontrollably.

He quickly wiped away my tears. "Yu Er, from now on I will never let you cry again. Since you left, I've been trying to make arrangements for all the businesses in the Shi Enterprises. Once I settle everything, let's buy a few horses and leave Chang An. We'll travel fast and disappear completely. From the Northern desert to the Southern valleys, we'll go wherever you want to go. There will be dangers ahead, but I know that together we can weather any obstacle."

My tears continue to rain down, no amount of wiping is enough to

stop it. In minutes, Jiu Ye's robe is completely soaked through at the shoulder. Since leaving the Palace this evening, my heart has been as heavy as a lead ball. Right now I don't know why I'm crying, all I know is that my heart hurts, it hurts so much, so much.

A hand brusquely jerked me aside, but it was so powerful that my entire body flew backwards. Before I can even make a sound, I've already fallen into a familiar embrace. Huo Qu Bing's entire body is rigid and his arm is so tight around me that I'm almost unable to breath. He didn't look at me once, only giving Jiu Ye a smile "Yu Er's tears, from now on I will wipe it away for her. There is no need to burden you."

Jiu Ye and Huo Qu Bing stared at each other for some time, and then they both turned to look at me. I closed my eyes, too scared to look at either of them. My tears continued to fall and my body continues to shake.

Huo Qu Bing said "Excuse us" and then picked me up in his arms and turned around to leave. His footsteps are rapid, and behind us Jiu Ye spoke up "Yu Er, this time it's my turn to win your heart." Huo Qu Bing stopped for a brief moment before continuing to walk away at an even faster pace.

Chapter 26: Angry Kiss

A twenty year old Huo Qu Bing is the shiniest star in Chang An. The vibe around him is as if following him will mean untold riches and an unlimited future, ready to be made a Duke or a General. Huo Qu Bing remains brash and arrogant in the way he behaves, his aura so bright it hurts the eyes. Admiration, dislike, hatred, jealousy, toadies, there remains an entire assortment of feelings about him amongst the people in court. But regardless of whether one is a minister or a royal, there is not a single person who dares to directly oppose Huo Qu Bing's intensity.

In comparison, Wei Qing becomes even more low key. In his tens of years commanding his forces, he has built up a long standing loyalty with his subordinates stemming from surviving battles together. His grace and valor is remains present, leaving him as sturdy as a mountain that the Emperor still cannot touch.

I hold a bamboo ledger, appearing to read it, but my mind is nowhere near it. That day, when Huo Qu Bing found me crying on Jiu Ye's shoulder, I thought he would get mad at me. Instead, after we returned home, he just held me in the dark, not saying a single word or making a single movement. He was like a statue. After a long time, he gently placed me on the pallet and laid down next to me. I was afraid of his silence so as I was about to say something, he put his hand on my mouth "I don't want to hear anything. Just get some sleep." In his voice I could hear the faint anxiety and fear.

After that, he acted like nothing happened, treating me the same as always. But every night, if he didn't come to my house, then he had someone pick me up to go to his estate. Because he has to attend court every day, and often the Emperor keeps him around afterwards, he oftentimes comes home drunk. I find myself usually staying at his place.

"Yu Er...." Huo Qu Bing called out. I had no idea when he actually entered the room, and I quickly put down the bamboo ledger "What's going on?" He sat down next to me "There is a banquet tonight in the Palace,

I.....” I asked “Planning to get drunk again?” He looked at me apologetically and I said “You can’t keep getting drunk so that Emperor has no chance to talk to you.” I handed him a summons and he opened it, turning his eyes icy cold “You’ve been summoned into the Palace.”

It’s a cool day, like its been washed clean by water, and the few clouds add a sense of liveliness. The female attendees at this banquet are strolling, their laughter mixed with their fragrance permeates the air. I’m leaning against a tree with my head raised looking at the sky. I suddenly sense someone staring at me. I turn and see a tall handsome man wearing a very rich attire staring me straight in the eyes. His face shows his disbelief and shock. I look at him and smile, and his shock disappears to be replaced with joy and unshed tears.

In a few moments, he’s composed himself again. He subtly walks around a few times, taking one more look at me before walking away.

Li Yan came out of nowhere and smiled at me “Ms. Jin appears to find admirers wherever you go. One Great General of the Han dynasty is devoted to you, and now a new addition to the court Sir Guang Lu appears to be quite taken with you. Jin Ri Chan arrived in Chang An only a short while ago. Because General Huo handled the defection of the Xiong Nu, the rumor is that he’s close friends with General Huo now.”

I felt a shock thinking about how she, of all people, happened to notice what just happened. I smiled and looked at a far away Li Gan “Your highness has been in the Palace for much too long if you’re only noticing romantic possibilities around you. Please don’t project your feelings onto someone else.” Li Yan glanced at Li Gan and with a cold smile “Ms. Jin appears to have lost weight lately?” and I reply “Your highness looks rather wan lately.”

Li Yan wants to marry me to Li Guang Li which means she fears me. More importantly, she wants to use this seemingly minor matter to test the Emperor’s intentions in this potential battle with the Wei family. Too bad for her, the Emperor may adore her, but he still refused to do as she asked. He did not favor the Li family over the Wei family. Instead, he chose to try

and control Huo Qu Bing for his own benefit.

Empress Wei walked up to us “What are you talking about? What’s so amusing?”

Li Yan quickly bowed while Empress Wei helped her up “I’ve heard you haven’t been feeling well lately. In the future please spare these courtesies. When you have time, read some medical wellness books, and try not to think too much about taxing matters. If you can let it go, just let it go.”

Li Yan smiled “Whatever big sister says, little sister I will follow your advice. Compared to big sister, I suppose I am too narrow-minded.” Li Yan snuck a peek at me “Little sister I am very pressed with big sister’s vast kindness, to be able to let go of things in the past.”

Empress Wei smiled softly and asked Auntie Yun “Jin Yu is not familiar with the Palace, please take care of her.” She took Li Yan’s hand and they walked away together “A few of the other sisters are curious about a new hairstyle you created, all asking me to get you to teach them.”

Auntie Yun gently smoothed my hair “You and Qu Bing have both lost weight.” I softly called her name, my heart fill with an ache that I can’t express.

Auntie Yun continued “Since following the Empress into the Palace, over the years I’ve seen so much sadness. I’m older now, and my heart is colder. I want to urge you both to take a step back. A man cannot help but have three or four wives. As long as he loves you, that is all that matters. Putting Qu Bing’s personality aside, I can’t believe you’re also so stubborn. The Emperor is not saying you can’t marry Qu Bing. And with a princess as the first wife, as a concubine that does not lessen your status. Any other woman out there would have happily accepted this arrangement. Initially I was wondering why you can’t be more understanding. In such a complicated environment, why can’t you take a step back and must now cause everyone headache. Ay!” Auntie Yun sighed “Hearing Qu Bing talking about you, you seem like such a vibrant person. But seeing you like

this today, I suddenly feel like it's not important anymore. I feel like you two are living the romantic girlish dreams of the youngsters. "To have one person's heart, to never be apart until the hair is white." But how many women in this world actually experience this? Even the famed love stories of the past, the man ended up cheating on the woman and finding a new love."

From the moment Huo Qu Bing entered the Palace, he was surrounded by all the young military officials and placed on a worshiping pedestal. My status is like dirt to his shiniest star so there is no way we could be seated together. When he sees Auntie Yun is by my side, his demeanor seems to relax.

We are separated by the torches and the crowds of revelers. People are talking and dining, the gold and the silver flashing. But all of this seems to disappear from our eyes. In this moment, I feel like we're intimately close to each other. I feel like everything he's thinking, I can understand it all. Yet we are physically apart from each other, so far apart that I feel like no matter how I reach my hand out I can never touch his hand.

Liu Che smiled at Huo Qu Bing "Your majesty I have ordered an estate built for you, the best in Chang An. It will start construction soon. And with a new home, all it needs is a lady of the house....."

I lower my head and play with the wine cup in my hand. This is a long time coming and to be expected, it cannot be avoided. I've reminded myself numerous times, but for some reason my hand still shakes uncontrollably. The wine splashes out of the cup and lands on my new skirt. The little drops, the wet scars, it looks like a departing person's tears.

Perhaps tomorrow will be the day I leave Chang An. Here in the wealth and power of the exalted and the royalty, within this largest and most luxurious city, where people from everywhere mingle, this place is not able to find space for my happiness.....

Perhaps it is like Li Yan once said. I belong to Xi Yu, I belong to the desert. There might not be well-tended peonies in ponds there, but there are

never ending blue skies and a sea of verdant grass.

My mind tried to think about all the wonders of the desert, but the blood in my body continues to chill. It becomes so cold that no matter how I try to contain myself, I cannot help but shiver. The wine in my cup, drop by drop, drop by drop, it continues to fall.

All the eyes at the banquet train with envy on Huo Qu Bing, but he looks aloof and with a barely concealed look of pain. Liu Che smiled and looked toward the side of the banquet where all the princesses were sitting, and right as he was about to say something, Huo Qu Bing suddenly stood up and walked to face Liu Che. He kneeled down and bowed his head on the ground and said in a resounding and certain voice “Your servant I thank your majesty for the generous grace. But your servant I have already decided. For every day the Xiong Nu is not eradicated, I shall never have a family. I cannot accept this estate!”

Huo Qu Bing’s words are tantamount to him making an oath that he is never getting married in his entire life. In a split second, the entire banquet falls silent, and the sound of a pin drop could be heard. Everyone looked confused, wondering why the normally brash accepting Huo Qu Bing would decline something as minor as an estate when he’s gotten much more rewards from Liu Che and he’s accepted it all. For someone raised in luxury like Huo Qu Bing, why would starting a family have any relation to eradicating the Xiong Nu?

I raise my head and stare in shock at Huo Qu Bing, my heart quivering with a sliver of happiness, but hurting more from the pain. Slowly that little bit of happiness also turned to sorrow and heartache. The cup in my hand shatters, but my heart hurts so much that I actually don’t feel the pain in my hand. I just feel my palm is hot, and I sense the drops of blood slowly dropping on my skirt. Thank goodness I wore a red outfit today, so it’s not going to be visible in the darkness.

Li Yan looked flabbergasted and shaken, while Empress Wei merely raised an eyebrow and continued smiling. Only Liu Che barely blinked an eyelash, keeping his original cool and smiling at Huo Qu Bing “The old

saying is that a man needs to have a family first then a career. You've already defeated the Xiong Nu many times, and your name is world renowned. As for eradicating the Xiong Nu, I merely want to push them out of the desert South region and force them to stay in the desert North. I did not seek to eradicate them, only keeping them from being able to attack the Han territories."

Huo Qu Bing stared at Liu Che, his demeanor chilly and somber "Your servant I have already made up my mind on this."

Liu Che stared at Huo Qu Bing, his eyes as sharp as knives, his imperial aura radiating from the throne. Everyone looking at this scene is already lowering their heads but Huo Qu Bing remains with his head held high staring Liu Che in the eyes. The silence seems to make this face-off even more pressure filled until the air is thick with tension, but suddenly Liu Che starts laughing "Fine! Whatever you want. I will keep the estate for you until you eradicate the Xiong Nu, and then I will bestow it on you then."

I lightly released my pent up breath. Liu Che backed down on this and Huo Qu Bing claimed a victory. But at what price? My heart hurt and my eyes are heavy with unshed tears. I hold the tears back, I cannot let them use my behavior to see through what Huo Qu Bing just did. I raise my head to look at the sky where there is a lone crescent moon and a few twinkling stars. My tears slowly stop coming, my heart was like a crane lightly flying away. In a second I'm a thousand miles away, flying back to the desert where we once rode side-by-side. That day there were people pursuing us with arrows, but we were free.....

A soft sigh came from Auntie Yun "Qu Bing said it and he did it. If it's not you, then he's not marrying anyone." After the banquet ended, Auntie Yun walked me to the front gates. Huo Qu Bing was already waiting for me beside the carriage. We stare at each other from across the sea of people moving about. My heart churned and my tears bubbled forth. This moment, this second, it was like another lifetime. Auntie Yun said nothing and just quietly departed.

I pack away all my myriad emotions, skipping forward and waving at him. My face has a brilliant smile and I quickly run towards him. I could care less if there are people around us and I leap into his embrace. I wrap my arms around his waist and softly whisper “The Palace food didn’t taste very good so I’m still hungry. Let’s hurry home and have the chef make me something yummy to eat.”

Huo Qu Bing tightly embraced me and smiled. Before his expression was dark and solemn, but in a split second he turned back into the sunshine boy I knew “Let’s go straight home then.”

The ministers around us, some looked away because they didn’t want to cause trouble, but some of the more arrogant ministers stared at us with looks of disgust. Someone whispered loudly “In public? What shameful behavior!” Only Jin Ri Chan remained expressionless, but in his eyes was laughter and warmth. Huo Qu Bing directed his coldest look at the person who said that. The person initially shrank from Huo Qu Bing’s stare, but then puffed up his chest as if taunting him.

I held Huo Qu Bing’s hand and laughingly touched his nose, saying in a loud voice “So where could that crazy dog have come from? Running around randomly biting people. If someone was bitten by a crazy hound, it’s not like we can bite back. I guess we have to let the dog be a dog and do his crazy howling. I guess we can find amusement in that.” I purposely made a gesture like I was listening for something. That person wanted to say something but couldn’t without admitting he was the “dog” that I just referred to. He just bit his tongue and glared at me.

Huo Qu Bing laughed and tapped my forehead. He helped me on the carriage and I lifted the curtain to peek outside. I quickly dropped the curtain and he asked “Jin Ri Chan recognized you?” I nodded “He was very careful and discreet. He looked at me and then walked away.” Huo Qu Bing pulled me down to rest on his shoulder “Seeing how he cares about you, I ought to take him out to drink.”

He suddenly noticed the blood droplets on my skirt and his face changed color. He immediately pulled the hand I was keeping hidden in my

sleeve out “You.....what is this.....” His voice was stuck in his throat and he couldn’t finish his sentence.

I smiled, wanting to explain but finding no good explanation. Even if I had an excuse he wouldn’t believe me. So I just stared at him with a smile, indicating he doesn’t have to fret. Huo Qu Bing silently stared at me, his eyes filled with hurt and self-blame. His finger lightly traced my smile and he lowered his head to kiss my palm. His lips traced the wound lightly, over and over again.

Qu Bing, the way you treat me, I do not feel the slightest bit of grievance.

.....

“Yu Er, a lady is here to see you.” Hong Gu looked nervous, causing me to wonder who it was. She explained the person was a Madam Chen. I startled for a moment before realizing who it was. I’ve been staying at Huo Qu Bing’s Estate for the past few days and today is the first day I’m back in Luo Yu House. And immediately Wei Shao Er is here to see me. Looks like she’s been keeping track of my whereabouts, and is looking to keep this from Huo Qu Bing.

I walk to the mirror and look at myself, asking Hong Gu “Please invite Madam Chen inside! It’s not convenient to talk outside.”

Hong Gu didn’t leave but gave me another look “Xiao Yu, I’ve heard about what happened in the Palace. General Huo refusing the estate given to him by the Emperor, and vowing to eradicate the Xiong Nu before starting a family. We were all in awe of his patriotism, but there is no way the Xiong Nu can be easily eradicated. So if the Xiong Nu remains for one day, he’s not willing to marry and have kids? The Great General Wei has three sons already, and he’s had two wives, one of them a Princess. But the Great General Wei still goes on the battlefield to fight the wars.”

I didn’t get to answer her before seeing a stressed middle aged woman

walking into the courtyard. She smiled to see me “You must be Jin Yu? Hong Gu didn’t come out for quite some time and I was worried you wouldn’t see me, so I was presumptuous and walked inside.” I hurry over to welcome her and apologize for making her wait. Hong Gu and Xing Yen politely greeted her and then left.

Wei Shao Er looked around my yard and her smile disappeared “I don’t want to beat around the bush. If there is anything I say that makes you uncomfortable, I apologize in advance.” I smile and nod, knowing my place in Chang An as but an orphan with limited connections, so might as well appear to be magnanimous.

“Gong Xun Aou told me that you don’t know your place and is just a hussy. Qu Bing’s bad behavior in the army base, you don’t try to stop him, and instead let him be. I heard this and felt terrible. I wasn’t expecting Qu Bing to marry a well-educated and virtuous woman, but at least she would behave appropriately. Right now the people in court are criticizing Qu Bing, and as a mother it hurts me to know this. I asked the Empress for her thoughts, and she surprisingly took your side. She requested that none of us pressure you. To know my sister likes you is something else, so likely you’re not as bad as Gong Xun Aou described. The way I see it, I just want to talk to you as a mother today.” Wei Shao Er talked and took notice of my demeanor.

I bowed “Madam please continue, Jin Yu is willing to listen.”

Her face showed a sliver of sadness “Qu Bing’s birthright you must have heard already. Since I did it, I’m not afraid of own up to it. I had him out of wedlock, and shortly after he was born, his father married another woman. In the Princess’ Estate, Qu Bing grew up following his uncle around, but he really longed for his own family. So today, you are causing him.....” She bitterly shook her head “They say “The worst unfilial act is to not have a descendant”, and how many twenty year old young men in Chang An doesn’t have a child already? Jin Yu, I’m here today as Qu Bing’s mother. Can you please reconsider. If.....” She stared at me “If you can leave Qu Bing, I would be eternally grateful.”

I stared at the ground in silence for quite some time. If it was someone else, nothing they could say would affect me. But this woman is Qu Bing's mother. Without her, there would be no Qu Bing. Right now his mother is sitting me pleading with me to leave him. My heart is hurting bit by bit, but outwardly I retain my composure.

Wei Shao Er waited for some time but saw that I remained sitting there with my head down "Jin Yu, I was also young once. It's not that I don't understand you kids, but people need to learn to adapt to reality....."

The door opened with a resounding slam and Huo Qu Bing strode into the courtyard. He took notice of me and Wei Shao Er before bowing to greet his mother "How did mother come to be here today?" Wei Shao Er looked at me with a hint of disgust "I've never met Jin Yu before, so I came to see her." Huo Qu Bing replied "If mother wanted to meet Yu Er, all you need to do is let me know and I would have brought her to meet you."

Before Wei Shao Er could respond, I quickly jumped in "Madam was just discussing the latest Chang An fashions with me, which you couldn't possibly be interested in." Huo Qu Bing looked at me and then at his mom, before nodding "You ladies do have your private chats. I've been out too long and must return now." Huo Qu Bing followed behind Wei Shao Er "I need to escort mother back to her estate first."

Even though it's Winter already, the sun remains bright and the light blankets the entire courtyard. But when I see their departing backs, all I feel is a sense of chill. "Yu Er, what's wrong? Why are you all ashen?" Hong Gu supported me and asked. I shook my head "Did you send someone to let Qu Bing know?" She sighed "Madam Chen suddenly showing up here, and I know whatever she wanted you would just suffer in silence because of General Huo. I'm afraid you'll be hurt, so I sent someone to get him."

I force a laugh "Madam Chen is a weak lone woman, what could possibly happen to me? If this happens again, don't let Qu Bing know, I can handle it." Wei Shao Er must think I was trying to stall her because I was waiting for Qu Bing to arrive, so now she must dislike me even more.

Hong Gu hesitated and then nodded her head. She escorted me into the room and poured me some tea “Yu Er, did you hear? The Shi Enterprises have split up.” I don’t even drink my tea “What?”

Hong Gu explained “In the last few days, the Shi Enterprises have suddenly split. The businesses have been split amongst the four Feng, Yu, Lei, Dian (Wind, Rain, Lightning and Thunder), and there is already discord among them. The prices for precious rocks and herbal medicine have been skyrocketing because people are unsure of whether these guys can run the businesses. Lu Feng has things under control because Shi Tian Cao is helping him. Rumor is the Jiu Ye is ill and doesn’t want to run it anymore. Yu Er, shall we find time to visit Jiu Ye in the next few days?”

My heart was roiling. He said he was going to do it, and he actually did it. He really was planning to set aside his long time family enterprise. Then I realized something was missing “What about Shi Sheng Xing and Shi Jing Yen? What are they doing?” Hong Gu shook her head, she didn’t know, other than Jing Yen left Chang An possibly because he was cheated out of his portion, and Sheng Xing followed him because they are as close as real brothers.”

Both Shi brothers have left Chang An, and are likely never coming back. Where could they go? Hong Gu asked me “Should we sell yet?” I hesitated and then said “Sell it to Zhang Dian, having him run the dancing houses leaves me feeling more relief.” Hong Gu nodded and looked around nostalgically “I’ve been here since I was young, so I want to keep this back portion where we live and just sell the front to Zhang Dian. We can just wall up the connecting portions.”

I thought a bit “Fine. Lower the price and Zhang Dian won’t object. I’m also used to living here, and as long as I don’t leave Chang An, I am too lazy to move.” Hong Gu teased “Even when you marry someone, you’ll still live here?” And then she realized what she said and immediately looked apologetic “Yu Er.....” I shook my head “Hong Gu, I’m not such a sensitive person.”

Hong Gu hesitated and then sighed “In the past, I prayed for you to

marry high. So I hoped that you would reciprocate General Huo's feelings, but you were always hot and cold with him. I hoped you would have a change of heart and can marry him someday. But look at things now.....I suddenly think that you following him will bring about only suffering. His branch is simply too high. Up there, the wind is cold and brisk, and there are predators lurking underneath. If you can marry a normal person, and live a simple life, it will be better than what you have now."

I grabbed Hong Gu's hand "Having a big sister like you, always worrying about me, I'm already more blessed than most of the girls here. I'm not that weak, the cold and brisk wind won't do anything to me." Hong Gu patted my hand "Since you left, the Shi Enterprises have been very good to Luo Yu House. What's happening now is causing quite a stir outside. Are you going to check on them? If so, please give my best to Jiu Ye." I turn my head and softly murmur "I'll take care of this, big sister you needn't worry."

.....

The first snow of this Winter season didn't come down hard, with small and large flakes trickling down intermittently. But it lasted for quite some time, snowing for four straight days. The rooftops and the tree tops are stacked high with snow, and the melted snow on the ground is quickly covered with fresh powder, slowly turning into ice. Often you see a pedestrian slip on the ice and land on the ground.

"Big sister Yu, are you going or not?" asked the former Shi Feng, and now called Lu Feng. I softly answered "Why so impatient still? I don't know how you manage to run a business." Lu Feng laughed coldly "I'm not like this when I'm doing business. Because you're my older sister, that's why I'm like this. But seeing as you are singlemindedly determined to become Madam Huo, likely you don't care for a younger brother like me nowadays. It's my grandpa that wants to see you, so if you refuse to make the trip, I'll have to let him know and have him come see you. But I'm not sure if you'll be willing to see him, so just tell me now so I can let him know."

I looked at the falling snow outside the window for some time and then said “You can go back first, I’ll be by the Shi Estate shortly.”

To make an elderly person happy and more cheerful, I wore a red outer robe to make myself more energetic. The carriage rumbles over the street and crunches over the ice on the ground, the sound hitting my ears steadily. How many times did I take this road before? Sometimes with joy, other times with anticipation, and even with sadness and despair. But today is the first time it feels torturous.

Other than Xiao Feng still living in the Shi Estate, everyone else has moved out. The Shi Estate was always on the quiet side, but now it’s even more lonely. Everywhere there is only solitary white. I’m holding a red umbrella and wearing a red outer robe, walking in the snow. I laugh to think of how eye catching I must look right now, a bright red spot within the white Winter wonderland.

Past the front living room and next to the lake, my eyes sudden see a sea of green foliage growing there that wasn’t there before. When did they plant something there? I take a closer look and my hurt aches, in a second my eyes fill with tears and I can’t see clearly anymore. In what feels like ages ago, someone told me that the Gold Silver Flowers were also called Enduring Winter, because the leaves remained green even during the Winter. He refused to say their other name that day, and refused to view the flowers with me. So this patch of Lover’s Vines growing next to the lake, who did he plant them for?

The entire world descends into silence, so silent that I can hear a snowflake landing on my umbrella. I stand in front of the Lover’s Vine for some time, the memories of the past have faded, but my tears fall nonetheless on the leaves of the vines. After some time, I stare ahead and force a smile on my face before turning and walking away.

Someone wearing a green robe is sitting on the ice of the lake ice fishing. The snowflakes slowly fall and the view is obscured, but based on what he’s wearing, it looks like Tian Cao. I hold my umbrella and slowly walk on the ice surface, being careful because it’s so slippery. It’s a short

distance but it takes me a good while to traverse it.

On the lake someone has drilled a hole that is the size of a bucket. A fishing pole is placed on a rack while the fisherman has his hands tucked inside his robe. He has a jug of wine next to him, and he sits there very relaxed and casual. I softly call out “Third brother Shi, the soft snow, the solitary fisherman on an icy lake, what an enjoyable experience!”

He heard my voice and turned around, and immediately my smile froze. I stand in place, unable to move forward and unable to retreat. Jiu Ye smiled warmly at me, like he didn’t have a care in the world. He softly called out “Just waiting for the fish to bite. You walk over slowly so you don’t scare them.” I think for a moment before I slowly walk to stand next to him. I ask in a low voice “I’m off to see grandpa. Thank you....for letting Xiao Dian take over the dancing houses. If you don’t want to run the dancing houses, then you can do whatever you want. But if it’s because of me, then you needn’t have.”

He appeared not to hear what I said, only pointing to a small stool next to him “Sit!” I stood there unmoving so Jiu Ye looked up at me “Why are you wearing so little? I was just planning on heading back, let’s go together!” He slowly pulled up the fishing rod and reached over to pick up the crutch that was stuck in the snow. He just picked up the crutch and stood up when the crutch slid on the snow. He was about to fall on the ice and I quickly reached forward to support him.

My one hand was holding the umbrella and I didn’t balance myself correctly in the haste, so my feet were also like it had been coated in oil. The two of us were slipping and barely able to support each other from both falling on the ice. Jiu Ye appeared not to care about himself and was only staring at me. He suddenly smiled and tossed his crutch aside, grabbing my arms and pulling me into his embrace. With his sudden gesture, I was so shocked that I wasn’t able to cry out before we had both fallen on the ice. My umbrella also flew out and went sliding away on the ice.

Our bodies are pressed together and our faces are inches apart. This is

the closest Jiu Ye and I have ever gotten to each other. My body was alternating between boiling hot and freezing cold. The snowflakes landed on my face and he reached over to brush it off. I turn my face to avoid him but he didn't seem to care and caressed my cheeks. I can't avoid him so I cry out "Jiu Ye, what you are doing? It's impossible between us now, I....."

He put his finger on my lips and shushed me. He smiled and shook his head "Yu Er, there is nothing that is impossible. I will not let you go this time. Huo Qu Bing is good to you, I will be even better to you. Huo Qu Bing can't marry you, but I can. Huo Qu Bing can't take you away from Chang An, but I can. What he can give you, I can also give you. What he can't give you, I can still give you. So Yu Er, you should marry me....." He was half smiling but it couldn't hide his anguish. His eyes remain steadfast "Next Summer, the Lover's Vines next to the lake will bloom. This time we will definitely view the flowers together."

He finished talking and lifted his finger from my lips, but the moment it was raised, he lowered it again and lightly brushed over my lips. His caress was filled with longing and regret, and his dark eyes turned passionate as he lowered his head to kiss me. I tried to avoid his kiss at the same time I tried to push him away. But my hands had no strength so the two of us became entangled in the snow. His lips would graze over my cheek or my forehead as we continued to roll around on the ice.

I suddenly heard the loud and unmistakeable sound of the ice beneath us cracking. In a split second, the little ice fishing hole began to crack swiftly. I was so startled and realized the ice could not sustain the weight of both of us. In my haste all I could think of was that nothing must happen to Jiu Ye, and I've forgotten everything else. I bite down hard on his neck and taste his blood in my mouth. He made a pained noise and his grip on my arms weakened. I used all my might to push him off me away from the cracking ice, which sent me flying backwards into the hole in the lake. My body hit the icy water immediately.

I try my best to swim but the cracked ice is so slippery I cannot grab on. In the bone chilling cold of the ice water, in moments my arms and legs no longer work. There is an undercurrent in the lake that quickly pulls me

away from the hole and I look up and see only a layer of ice above my head. I know my chances of survival are none. I can vaguely hear Jiu Ye's anguished cry, and in my quickly blackening out mind all I can see is the smiling face of Huo Qu Bing. I quietly apologized to him. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Maybe the princess will be a wonderful woman.

In the beginning my chest hurt from the lack of oxygen, but after some time, I began to lose consciousness and even my body stops feeling cold or pain. I feel like I'm so light I could fly away. Suddenly I'm grabbed tightly by the arm of someone holding me. Lips are pressed against mine to feed me oxygen and that wakes me up. Immediately my body hurts so badly and I force my eyes open. Jiu Ye's dark eyes are staring at me with warmth even though his face is ice white with cold. One of his arms is entwined on a fishing line and he's desperately holding on to it and trying to pull us against the current back to the opening in the lake. The fishing line is fast digging into his arms and the blood is trickling out. I can see the red seeping into the water around us.

His movements become slower and slower and his ashen white face starts turning blue. But the hole in the lake is still very far from us. I use my eyes to tell him not to save me, and I try to push myself away from him. But his unwavering eyes staring at me never change. It communicates one simple message: either we live together, or we die together!

I feel anger and hopelessness. How can you die like this? Everything I just did was for naught? The pain and despair in my heart makes me unable to hold on and I slowly slip away into unconsciousness.

.....

A day and a night's accumulation of snow makes the entire world frosty, but I'm instead so hot I'm sweating. My mouth is so parched it hurts, causing me so much discomfort I wake up suddenly. I realize then that I'm under heavy blankets and there is a hot burning pit of coal in the room that is roasting me.

I sit up but my body feels stiff and hard to move. I try my best but can

barely move my arm. Huo Qu Bing, who had his head down on the pallet napping, woke up and looked at me with unfettered joy “You’re awake!”

I had thought that I would never see him again, so seeing him smiling at me, my heart was filled with both anguish and happiness. I croaked out “So hot, so thirsty” and he quickly got up and poured me a cup of water. He eased me into his embrace and slowly helped me drink the water “The doctor said you are suffering from moderate frost bite and the cold has seeped deep into your body. You need to rest for a few days, but thankfully you’re quite hearty to begin with so a bout of fever and you’ve warmed up again. If it was any other woman, you’d likely be dead or at least suffering permanent damage.

His voice sounded scratchy and I can see his ravaged face, making my eyes redden “How many days have I been sick? Have you been here the entire time? I will get better eventually, but why didn’t you get any rest?” He gently caressed my face “Three days and two nights. How can I possibly fall asleep? It was only this morning that your fever broke, and that was when I finally let out a sigh of relief.” I was worried about Jiu Ye but afraid to ask how he was doing, so I murmured “I....how was I rescued?”

How can I possibly ever conceal anything from Qu Bing, and he clearly knows what I’m getting at. He was silent for a moment and then casually said “Meng Jiu secured the fishing rod on a tree branch and then followed the fishing line into the water to retrieve you. The servants of the Shi Estate showed up just in time and saved you both. Meng Jiu was wearing a fox vest that protected him from the cold, plus he entered the water later than you, so even though his arm is injured and he lost quite a lot of blood, but he’s recovered nicely these past few days. He ought to be arriving shortly to check on you.”

I suddenly realized that this was my old room in the Bamboo Residence “I....why are we here?” Huo Qu Bing lightly smiled “Meng Jiu said you couldn’t be moved because you were so chilled, and the best royal physician I summoned from the Palace also said the same thing. I had no choice but to keep you here until you recovered. Yu Er, how did you lose your footing and fall into an ice hole?” I didn’t know how to answer so all I

could say was “I’m sorry, I promise to be more careful in the future.”

He tightly hugged me “Yu Er, promise me that this can never happen again. Never.” One look at his haggard face and his cracking scratchy voice and my hurt just swells with anguish so that all I can do is nod vigorously.

The door is gently opened and Xiao Feng wheels Jiu Ye inside. He takes a look at Huo Qu Bing and quietly leaves. Jiu Ye’s arm is securely wrapped in a sling and his face is white as he stares at Huo Qu Bing “I need to listen to her heartbeat.”

Huo Qu Bing shifted slightly to give him space, but he still kept me resting against his chest. Jiu Ye looked at Huo Qu Bing as if he was about to say something, so I quickly spoke up “Can you see when I’ll get better. I can’t move my body and it’s so hot, I’m terribly uncomfortable.”

A quick flash of pain passed through Jiu Ye’s face and he nodded. Huo Qu Bing had a slight smile as he pulled out my arm from under the blanket. Jiu Ye listened to my heartbeat and then checked out my countenance.

I suddenly felt Huo Qu Bing’s body stiffen behind me. I turn to give him a questioning look and I see that his eyes are staring directly at Jiu Ye’s neck. Right there is a clear and visible set of teeth marks. He turns to look at me with disbelief and doubt. My heart was beating so fast I was afraid to look him in the eye so I quickly turn away.

Huo Qu Bing’s entire body is rigid and I can feel the coldness emanating from him. I was originally burning up but quickly I feel cold again. Jiu Ye looks confused and tries to reach out his hand to touch my forehead but Huo Qu Bing immediately brushes his hand aside and asks coldly “When can we leave?”

I give Jiu Ye a pleading look and he notices how distressed I look. His eyes show his concern for me, so after hesitating for a moment “Her chill is almost all gone. If you find a carriage and pack it full of blankets, you can

take Yu Er home.”

The moment Huo Qu Bing carries me into the carriage, he bites me hard on my neck. He draws blood and I bite my lips from crying out. I endure this pain on my neck, and the even more painful hurt in my heart. He raised his head to stare at me, his lips red with my blood, his eyes burning with anger. He just stares at me, as if seeking from me a denial, an explanation, a promise. The tears come to my eyes but I cannot say a single word. I see all these emotions in his eyes: pain, rage, despair. He lowered his head and roughly kissed me, the taste of the blood seeping through from the touch of our lips and tongues, a potent acrid sweetness in the rage.

Chapter 27: An Argument

Because I was convalescing, Huo Qu Bing rarely went back to his own estate so that he could spend as much time with me as possible. He's here almost daily, and we both go out of our way to avoid discussing certain things. All we do is try to make the other person happy, and to hide any unhappiness. It's as if his only purpose right now is to make sure I get better, and we've both purposely forgotten the reason I got sick in the first place. At least, we try to pretend we've forgotten.

I've laid on a pallet for nearly half a month now and the new year is upon us before I can get up and move around. I look at myself in the mirror and notice that my face has expanded by an entire size. I put my hand under my chin and press on my cheeks. Yup, chubby. "Looks like I won't be able to fit into the new outfit I had made just for the new year." Xing Yen was snerking off the to side "How could you NOT gain weight? It's like General Huo has been daily feeding a....." I glared at her and made a slashing gesture on my neck to indicate she better shut up. I don't care if they laugh about me behind my back, but she better not dare say that word in front of me now.

"It's not I who said it, it's Hong Gu who said it. General Huo is no longer a general these days, he's become a pig farmer. All day long he asks "What has Yu Er eaten today?" "How much has she eaten?" "She needs more nutritious foods."...." Xing Yen stuck her tongue out at me and skipped out of the room. Too bad she ran into into an arriving Huo Qu Bing, causing her face to lose all color. Immediately she kneeled on the ground and bowed her head. I was planning to get her back for what she just said, but now I just clap and laugh at her "You totally got your just desserts!"

Huo Qu Bing glanced over Xing Yen and smiled at me "Guess who I brought to see you?" I thought for a moment and my heart leaped "Ri Chan?" Huo Qu Bing nodded and opened the curtain behind him "Welcome honored guest! Someone didn't even blink when she saw me, but the moment she heard it was you, her two eyes lit up."

I shot a look at Huo Qu Bing and told a kneeling Xing Yen “Tell the kitchen to make a few dishes and....ask Hong Gu if there is any wine from the Xi Yu region and bring some here.” Ri Chan is wearing a white fox fur cloak and he slowly walked inside. My heart swelled leaving me unable to find a single word to say. All I can do is stare at him and dumbly smile. Memories from my childhood come flooding back: passionate and impetuous Yu Dan, mischievous and difficult Mu Da Duo, and a wise-beyond-his-years Ri Chan.

Ri Chan also silently stared at me, finally smiling and nodding his head “Your being alive makes me so happy.” I also smile and nod my head “Seeing you again also makes me so happy.” A million words we want to say, and all we can say is a simple “happy”.

Huo Qu Bing leaned on the pallet “Are you guys planning to just stand there and talk all day?” Ri Chan smiled and took off his cloak and placed it next to Huo Qu Bing’s black ermine cloak, then joining him on the pallet. I help Xing Yen place the food on the table and then Huo Qu Bing pulls me down to sit next to him. His hand remains on my waist, but since Ri Chan is here, I’m embarrassed and try to shake him off. Ri Chan shook his head and smiled “This is the first time I’ve ever seen her blush. Looks like General Huo isn’t just capable at fighting wars, you also managed to tame this difficult girl.”

Huo Qu Bing actually had an uncharacteristically modest expression and just lowered his head and drank his cup of wine. I place a cup in front of Ri Chan and pour him some wine “The moment we reunite and you’re already saying mean things about me. Your punishment is to drink.” Ri Chan doesn’t decline and picks up his cup and downing the wine. He softly said “I’m sorry” and I shook my head “No need to say that. There was nothing you could have done back then.”

Ri Chan smiled but it was a forlorn smile. He poured himself another cup “Do you know that Mu Da Duo has married Yi Zhi Xie?” I play with the empty cup in my hand “I’ve seen them, and I accidentally shot an arrow into Mu Da Duo.”

Ri Chan was stunned and then he understood “No wonder! So that was what happened! Rumor was that she got injured when she was in pursuit of General Huo, but I didn’t know you were the one to injure her. Yi Zhi Xie, because of you.....” Ri Chan shot a look at Huo Qu Bing “.....and Yu Dan, he was especially caring towards Mu Da Duo and me. Especially towards Mu Da Duo, he was coddling and protective. Mu Da Duo didn’t understand back then and just worshipped Yi Zhi Xie. But once she realized what was the reason, I can tell she was in a lot of pain. But after being injured this time, Yi Zhi Xie treats her a bit differently than before. So you have seen them already.....”

Mu Da Duo didn’t die, so that means she and I no longer owe each other anything. Our childhood friendship can now end and we will never have any further relationship with each other. I no longer care about their lives at all. I cut off Ri Chan “Why does Yi Zhi Xie want to kill your father and the other tribal chief?” Ri Chan hesitated for a moment “Since you’ve seen him, don’t you think he’s changed?”

I replied “He....he appears to have less patience than before. In the past he was ruthless, but now he’s added a vicious streak. He’s also completely distrusting of people. That day, when his guards lied, none of us suspected, but he immediately could tell. It’s clear that he’s likely never trusted those people to begin with, and he is now unwilling to forgive people for any transgression.”

Ri Chan nodded “Since he amassed an army and proclaimed himself the Shan Yu, the most important change to his personality is that he no longer trusts anyone. He’s always worried that someone around him will do what he did. A prolonged period of distrust has caused all of us around him to wonder not if this would happen again, but when.” Ri Chan sighed “As his subordinates, the worst feeling is following a ruler who is constantly suspecting you. Yi Zhi Xie has great hopes and plans for the Xiong Nu, but because of his deeply rooted suspicions, all the tribal chiefs live in fear and are afraid to act.”

Huo Qu Bing laughed “Suspicion is the foundation of being a ruler, and a good ruler simply puts his suspicion within the confines of a reasonable boundary. Using the tactics of a ruler to control those around

him, some rulers go overboard, but I find Yi Zhi Xie is still within the boundaries of reason. The Han has a saying called “not a proper name, not a correct saying” and Yi Zhi Xie suffers from this (for usurping the throne). Right now the awkward relationship between Yi Zhi Xie and his tribal chiefs are partly to blame on the behavior of the tribal chiefs. If Yu Dan had ascended the throne, they would have naturally submitted to him. But the way Yi Zhi Xie came to power, they are all holding a watch and see attitude towards him. If Yi Zhi Xie is a good ruler, then they will think it was meant to be. If not, then they will all wonder what if Yu Dan had taken over. All these thoughts are clearly visible to Yi Zhi Xie, so how could he not be frustrated with his subordinates?”

Ri Chan drank and sighed “It’s hard to believe that the person who understands our Shan Yu today is not a Xiong Nu person, but it’s instead the Great General Huo. If the Shan Yu heard what you just said, he would have wanted to drink with you because you are his kindred spirit.” Ri Chan continued “On the scholarly side there is Dong Fang Xu, Shi Ma Xiang Ru, Shi Ma Qian and company. On the military side there is the Great General Wei and the Great General Huo. Plus an Emperor with great vision and foresight. A Han dynasty that will conquer far and wide is dawning.....” Ri Chan toasted Huo Qu Bing “You are one of the builders of this great Han dynasty, and you and I....” Ri Chan toasted me “.....are lucky enough to have a front row seat to watch this sure to be thrilling and epic writing of history before our eyes.”

It’s hard to find a friend to drink with, and even with Huo Qu Bing and Ri Chan’s high tolerance levels, they still drink enough to get tipsy. Ri Chan prepares to leave and I give him his fox fur cloak. Walking him out the door, even though I said I wasn’t cold, Huo Qu Bing draped his black ermine cloak over me.

Ri Chan was wobbling as he walked out the door, slapping Huo Qu Bing on the shoulder “I’ll place Yu Jin in your hands now. She’s suffered quite a lot already. You....you have to treat her well.” Huo Qu Bing was also slightly unsteady on his feet but his smile was wide as he replied “No problem. You needn’t worry, I promise to take good care of her.” I humph at them “Do you guys notice me standing here? Can’t believe you’re talking as if I’m not right here.” They continue to ignore me and drape their

arms around each other's shoulder, laughing and chatting like the best of friends.

At the front door, a carriage passes by and I notice the wolf brand on the back of the horse. It looks familiar but I can't remember where I've seen it before? Ri Chan said in surprise "I can't believe the wolf brand can be seen in Chang An?" I quizzically ask him "You've seen it before? I also think it looks familiar." Ri Chan explained "It belongs to a very mysterious group in Xi Yu with a history going back seventy or eighty years. Rumor has it that it was the largest desert thief organization in all of Xi Yu. But others say it's not, since people have seen the wolf brand protect Han travelers against other desert thieves. No one can say who they really are, but where the wolf brand shows up, everyone in Xi Yu knows to avoid them. It's clear they are very powerful in Xi Yu."

I make an "ah" sound of comprehension and then suddenly remember where I've seen the wolf brand before. That day when I went to eat in Long Xi with Li Cheng, I saw the wolf brand and the waiter said that the two men were looking for a young girl. That day I thought it looked familiar so I make a mental note of it.....

The cold wind makes Ri Chan even more clumsy as he stumbled onto his carriage. Huo Qu Bing is also wobbling so I stop thinking about this matter and quickly move to hold him still. After Ri Chan's carriage departs, I notice from the corner of my eye Li Guang Li sitting on a horse watching this scene from a distance. Huo Qu Bing currently has his arm around my waist and his head rest on my shoulder. I let out a resigned sigh and turn around to help Huo Qu Bing back inside. I hope Li Guang Li doesn't share this with Li Yan, otherwise who knows what she'll do next.

After I walk in the yard a short distance, I suddenly remember where I've seen the wolf brand. Thieves? Jiu Ye once said that his grandfather was a thief, and now a series of images flashes through my mind. I remember where I first saw the wolf brand, it was my first meeting with Jiu Ye at the Yue Ya Spring. That day Shi Jing Yen even pointed to the wolf brand and berated me for daring to try to steal from them. That's why I've a recollection of that wolf brand.

Then....that day at the restaurant in Long Xi when they were looking for a young girl.....were they looking for me? Was Jiu Ye already looking for me back then? If he had found me then, what would things be like now? We were once so close to each other, one outside the window, the other inside. But alas, we appeared to have just missed each other.

“Yu Er, I’m so thirsty!” Huo Qu Bing called out and I quickly gathered my thoughts and hurried my steps to help him back inside the room “We’re almost back. What would you like to drink? Some tea, or some fresh fruit juice?”

.....

With so many thoughts swirling around, I ended up not going to the Shi Estate to wish grandpa a happy new year. I only send someone to deliver presents there. Huo Qu Bing has many elders so he left the estate first thing in the morning to go wish everyone a happy new year. I’m bored sitting by myself and remember a few days ago when Huo Qu Bing saw Hong Gu embroidering a pouch. He teasingly asked me if we might just get engaged without anyone’s permission, and I can make him an embroidered pouch as a symbol of our engagement. I’ve never spent time on things like embroidering, but since I’ve nothing to do, I decide to try it out! I think about how happy and surprised he’ll be when he sees the pouch and that makes me so happy inside.

I look for all types of colored thread and go ask Hong Gu for a pattern sheet. Hong Gu looks everywhere before sending me a pattern sheet consisting of a pair of intertwining gold and silver flowers. One gold, one silver, the lines are simple but the design is lively and elegant. Hong Gu sees me staring at the pattern in a daze and teases me “I wanted to find you something else, but nothing else is easy to embroider. This is the easiest and looks so pretty. It’s perfect for someone like you without much experience with embroidering. I worked hard to dig this up, so if you’re not happy I’ve got nothing else. I’ll have to hire someone to embroider something else for you.”

I shook my head “No need, this is fine!” I tie two bamboo rods around

the cloth and prepare the needle and thread. Hong Gu shows me how to get started, and once she sees I'm doing well enough on my own, she leaves to do other things so I can slowly embroider. I sit next to the window with my head bent embroidering. Sometimes I would raise my head and take a break, breathing in the scent of the plum blossoms from the garden wafting inside. It smells lovely, but I can hear some firecrackers popping occasionally as well which initially disrupted my concentration. Eventually I get used to it and focus my attention on the embroidering, barely noticing it anymore.

"What an unusual sight to see Xiao Yu with a needle and thread in her hand." Tian Cao's voice suddenly rings in my ears and I lift my head to see Jiu Ye standing there. In my shock the needle pierces my finger and the pain causes me to snap out of it. I smile and pull the needle out "Jiu Ye and third brother Shi, happy new year!" Jiu Ye looked at the embroidery in my hand and says nothing. Tian Cao looked at Jiu Ye and then at me "Aren't you going to invite us inside? Are we going to talk through the window the whole time?" I hurry to put the embroidery down and welcome them in with a smile.

Tian Cao sits down in front of the table, not even shooting the breeze with me before picking up a tea pot and pouring himself a cup. Jiu Ye wheeled himself next to the window and picked up my embroidery, turning to look at me with his eyes vibrant "Is your finger still bleeding? Let me take a look." He wheeled himself over but I stepped back and hid my finger behind my back. "Just a few drops of blood, it's no big deal."

He smiled and put the embroidery down "I've just been wanting an embroidered pouch. What luck that you've decided to pick up a needle and thread. When you have time why don't you make me one?" I pretend I didn't hear what he said "Would you like some tea?" Jiu Ye replied "No thanks. We're here to see you and we'll be leaving shortly. We also want to pass word from Xiao Feng's grandpa, thanking you for your presents. Please visit him when you have time."

I murmur a soft yes while Jiu Ye continues to smile "If you're reluctant to go to the Shi Estate because of me, I can always stay away." After sending Jiu Ye and Tian Cao away, I'm no longer in the mood to

embroider so I just lay on the window sill with my mind blank.

There is some dust on the window corner and I wipe it off. Dust can be wiped away so easily, leaving me to bitterly wonder why my heart couldn't be the same way. I can decide who to keep inside, and who to thoroughly wipe away. Wouldn't that be great! I can control my behavior but my heart isn't so easy to control. When it likes someone, it refuses to listen; and now when it will let me forget, it also won't tell me.

Tian Cao hurried into the yard and I stare behind him "Jiu Ye is not here, and he doesn't know I'm here either." I slowly stand up "What do you want? If you're here to ask me to reconsider, then there is no need."

Tian Cao answered "I'm not here to ask you anything. We all saw what happened between you and Jiu Ye years ago. Whomever you choose today, none of us have any grievances about that. We can only chalk it up to Jiu Ye not having that good fortune. But I just want to tell you something you might not know. Did you know that Jiu Ye started looking for you on the very day you left Chang An?"

My heart was aching "I didn't know before, but I just discovered it a few days ago. I saw the wolf brand. Did Jiu Ye ask them to look for me?" Tian Cao nodded his head "It wasn't just the wolf brand looking for you, the assassins organizations in Xi Yu, all the desert thieves in the desert, even the Luo Lan and Gui Su kingdoms were all looking for you. But you had thoroughly disappeared."

I smiled wanly. There was no way anyone could have known that I had been nabbed and taken to the Han dynasty army base to cross-dress and pretend to be a soldier. I never even made it to Xi Yu and instead followed the army to the Xiong Nu. No matter how many people were looking for me in Xi Yu, there was no way I could be found there. It was my letter to Huo Qu Bing that ended up directing Jiu Ye the wrong way.

Tian Cao continued "We followed your every move once you left Chang An, but our trail stopped at the inn in Liang Zhou. We asked around but there were no leads. Because of this, Jiu Ye even made a trip to the Huo

Estate to plead with the housekeeper there. Jiu Ye, who has never once begged anyone before, even when the Shi Enterprises were failing Jiu Ye never even went to beg the Emperor, and it turns out that the first person Jiu Ye ever begged in his entire life was a housekeeper at the Huo Estate. I don't want to recollect the insult we endured that day."

That day at the Long Xi army base, I finally now realize what the conversation was about across the curtains. I also understand why the soldier's voice suddenly got so low I couldn't hear it anymore. Huo Qu Bing must've told him to silence himself.

"When General Huo returned to Chang An, Jiu Ye also went to see him personally. General Huo was actually very polite to Jiu Ye, but when asked about your whereabouts, he only replied that he did not know. Jiu Ye is an open person who behaves in a straightforward way. Even with the way things have turned out today, he's not going to stab anyone in the back. He feels like he owes you so much, and this is the price he has to pay for not being honest with you back then. This is his punishment for not treasuring you when he had the chance. But I don't care about any of that. I just want you to know the entire truth so that it is fair for both you and for Jiu Ye. General Huo is indeed an extraordinary man. On the battlefield he's a fearless warrior, and off the battlefield he's a genuine romantic. He's truly a real man's man, an undeniable hero. No matter who you pick, I will be happy for you."

Tian Cao finished talking and turned around and left, leaving me standing alone in the wind.

It's long past dinner time and outside is already pitch black. Huo Qu Bing comes home with a face full of fatigue and sees Xing Yen clearing the plates. He asks incredulously "How come dinner is so late?" I don't answer and Xing Yen bows and quickly says "She didn't eat at all. However the plates looked when I brought them was how they looked when I cleared them."

I lightly murmur "Xing Yen, you can leave when you're done clearing the table." Xing Yen gave me a look and pouted, but her movements got

faster and soon she was done and left the room. Huo Qu Bing smiled and sat down next to me “What’s wrong? Upset that I’m back so late?” He’s smiling but I can see the hidden stress in his eyes. I asked “Did the elders give you a lot of grief?” He replied “You don’t have to worry about these things. I’ll handle it. Now tell me why you didn’t eat dinner?”

I see the stress in his eyes and my heart aches, so I tamp down what I was about to say and shake my head “No reason. I ate some fried snacks at lunchtime, and with the lack of activity, I’m just not hungry still.” He stood up and took off his outer robe “Then let’s eat later when you’re hungry!” He suddenly saw the half-embroidered pouch in the tray and asked in shock “Did you make that?” He picked it up and looked at it for quite some time, his eyes twinkling with happiness “Is it for me? What...did you prick yourself?”

He walked over to me and picked up my hand to look at my finger but I quickly pulled it back and turned my head “I didn’t embroider it for you, it’s for myself.” He hesitated for a moment and sat down next to me, forcefully turning my head to look at him “What’s going on? Yu Er, if something happened you can start a fight with me, you can berate me, but don’t be upset like this without telling me why. Isn’t a married couple supposed to be honest with each other?”

“Who’s married to you?” I said it so fast that it was out before I realized it, and I saw the look of hurt pass through his eyes. My heart hurt as well and I quickly said “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m....I’m sorry.” He smiled sadly “The person who should be sorry is me. I can’t marry you, and yet I’m keeping you by my side without a proper title.”

I counter “I don’t care about official titles. And since I don’t care about these things, clearly I’m not upset because of this. I just want to ask you....have you always been honest with me?” He smiled confidently “Of course!”

I stare at him in silence and his brow furrows as he thinks about something, causing his expression to turn chilly ” Did you go see Meng Jiu?” He coldly continued “If you are referring to what happened at the inn

in Liang Zhou, then I don't think I did anything wrong. Since he doesn't like you, why does he keep bothering you? You give him chance after chance, so what right does he have to wait until you've left before seeking you out?"

I can't believe that he doesn't feel the least bit guilty for what he did. The little bit of hurt I feel for him dissipated and all my anger bubbles forth "Huo Qu Bing, you did this for your own personal reasons. There is the insulting and ridicule, followed by the withholding of information. Your behavior is deplorable!"

I can see the vein throbbing in his forehead and all the hurt in his eyes. He stared at me and suddenly started laughing "Because of him....you" He shook his head and continued to laugh "What am I in your eyes? I did have my own personal reasons. My personal reason was that I didn't want to see him hurt you again. I just wanted you to forget all the pain of the past and stop being tormented by it all. My personal reason was wanting you to be happy."

He suddenly stood up and walked out of the room. In seconds his figure has disappeared into the dark night and in that moment, the lamplight in the room appeared to have dimmed significantly. It was clearly his fault, so how did it manage to become my fault? I pick up the embroidery and throw it on the floor. The moment my foot is about to crush the just embroidered gold and silver flower, I hesitate. My body weakens and I lay down on the pallet. My heart is bitter and I wonder to myself – the complicated intertwining vines, so which one of us is grabbing the other person?

[And here's the end of the line, folks. This is the last chapter I'm translating. If ever I finish this project, I guess you'll know because a new chapter will have popped up. It's rather apropos this is the last chapter translation, the mood really echoing how I feel right now. I finished this before the news hit, so it's your gain this chapter is even out. Had the news hit even before I finished the final sentence, I would have hit delete. That's how angry I am. Thanks for a wonderful time reading and chatting with me. It was fun while it lasted.]

Chapter 28: Illness

A few days have passed and still Huo Qu Bing hasn't shown up. Hong Gu, Xing Yen, and none of the maids understand what could have happened. Hong Gu tries to ask me but I refuse to say anything. I feel the mood is getting so tense and soon everyone around me talks less and their voices get lower. Until the end, when the maids see each other, they simply communicate via their eyes. One would shoot a look to the other while the other returns a look. I have no clue what they are communicating and how they are able to understand each other.

I point to Xing Lan and Xing Yen, who are delivering a meal, and ask Hong Gu "Do you have any idea what they are saying to each other?" Hong Gu replied "What's so hard to understand. Xing Lan asked Xing Yen "Did she eat today?" Xing Yen shook her head "Nope." Then Xing Lan followed with "I haven't eaten either, I'm so hungry!" Then Xing Yen snuck a peek at you and nodded to Xing Lan "Later let's get something to eat behind Yu Er's back!" and then the two girls agreed."

I spit out the tea in my mouth, coughing and laughing at the same time "Hong Gu, looks like your visual communications with Xing Yen after you entered the room was also all about whether I've eaten, and making plans to go eat later." Hong Gu calmly sipped her tea "My question was not "Has she eaten today?" but was instead "Has she drank anything today?" I wiped my lips with a handkerchief "You go on talking nonsense!"

Hong Gu lowered her cup "If I don't talk nonsense how can I get you to laugh. These past few days your expression has been just terrible. You're hurting and we are also suffering for you. Yu Er, why are you so hard on yourself? You clearly miss him terribly and are filled with lots of worries. Why don't you go see him?" I lower my head and say nothing when Xing Yen walks in "Ms. Yu Er, Housekeeper Chen from the Huo Estate is here to see you."

Hong Gu quickly invited him in and walked out "The mediator is here so I can let out a breath of relief. If you two don't make up, you two

might be able to withstand it, but none of us can any longer.”

Uncle Chen walked in and immediately kneeled before me without even saying a word. I try to duck “Uncle Chen, please talk directly, I can’t take such a courtesy from you.” He continued to kneel, his face completely bleak, like he hasn’t slept all night

“Ms. Yu, that day when the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises came to see me to ask about you, he made a total of three trips. Each time I kept him out, and I also.....I also was quite rude to him. Even though young master ordered that we hide the driver of the carriage and conceal all information related to the inn at Liang Zhou, all he did was ask me to keep your whereabouts secret but he never asked me to be rude to Jiu Ye. Young master is arrogant and now he’s trying to protect me, so he’s not bothering to explain to you. I can’t watch the two of you fighting over something I did all on my own, causing a rift between you two.”

Mu hurt came forth “Uncle Chen, why did you do that? What’s happening right now, is this the happiness you wanted for Qu Bing?” Uncle Chen was silent and only bowed his head to me three times. I continue to try and avoid his courtesy but he managed to bow at least once to me “Please get up! What can I do now since everything has already happened. Even if I rage or ask for punishment, there are no do-overs. Please get up and talk. I’m not used to talking to someone kneeling to me.”

Uncle Chen continued to kneel and said nothing. Moments passed and I stared at him quizzically. He suddenly avoided my eyes and appeared to be summoning his courage. It took him a long time to say it “Yesterday the young master was out riding and he suddenly tumbled off his horse. He’s been unconscious since then.”

His words were so unbelievable that I couldn’t comprehend what he just said “What? What did you just say?”

Uncle Chen spoke in such a low voice “The Palace physicians have been by many times but none of them have any solution. Normally they are all proclaiming themselves miracle healers fighting for recognition and

respect. But once they face a genuine illness, they start hemming and hawing, trying to pawn it off on each other. The Palace is already in an uproar and the Emperor is in such a rage that he's threatened to kill the entire lot of them. If killing them means the young master will awaken, I don't care if a hundred heads roll. But right now we need them to save a life."

I only understood a few words of what he was saying, but it was like the sky had fallen on me. My shock, fear, regret, and pain all bubbled forth. I pay no heed to what he's saying and my foot is already out the door. Uncle Chen rushed behind me and kept calling me "Ms. Yu, please slow down, I'm not done talking yet." I see the carriage outside belongs to the Huo Estate and I leap inside "Immediately return to the estate" I ordered.

I can hear Uncle Chen calling me "Please wait" and the driver doesn't move. I want to grab the reins and drive the carriage but Uncle Chen calls out to me "Ms. Yu, I'm not done talking. I've heard that the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises is a talented healer. I was wondering...." I now realize why he didn't start by telling me that Qu Bing was ill, and why he was on his knees and bowing to me. So this was the whole story.

Uncle Chen ran in front of the carriage and was out of breath "Hiring a doctor requires the doctor to be willing to heal the patient. I know Ms. Yu's personality hates that I'm beating around the bush right now, and I am so embarrassed and ashamed about it as well. But if I don't explain everything, I cannot ask you to help. If young master Meng Jiu can heal my young master, if he wanted my head, I'd hand it to him without blinking an eye."

I angrily huff "You underestimate Jiu Ye!" My heart was churning with anxiety to go see Qu Bing immediately, but I have to push that urge down. I tell the driver "Go to the Shi Estate." Uncle Chen said he would return to the estate and wait for us.

Jiu Ye sat there reading a novel and when he raised his head and saw me, his book dropped to the ground. He looked incredulous and his dark eyes were shining with happiness "Yu Er, I've waited for so long, and

you've finally decided to walk back into the Bamboo Residence willingly." My heart ached and I wouldn't meet his eyes "I'm here to ask you to heal Qu Bing. He's been unconscious since yesterday and word is that none of the Palace physicians can heal him."

The light in his eyes slowly disappear until his eyes are simply dark with disappointment, sadness, and pain. He didn't ask anything and just said one word "Yes" and then pushed his wheelchair out the door. Uncle Chen was waiting outside the estate and when he saw Jiu Ye, his old face was bright red. He bow low and Jiu Ye graciously asked him to get up. But Uncle Chen's face was still beet red with shame. Two servants came with a bamboo pallet and Uncle Chen explained that the estate was not made for wheelchair access and this would be faster.

Jiu Ye smiled "Please have them hold the pallet still, I can get on myself. Have the wheelchair brought inside, I'll need it later." I see the way Uncle Chen is behaving and I'm angry to think about how poorly he must've treated Jiu Ye before to be so polite and courteous now. I sarcastically say "I wonder how he was able to move about the estate in his wheelchair in previous occasions?"

Uncle Chen said nothing and just led the way, while Jiu Ye looked at me and the coldness in his eyes seeped away. He murmured in a low voice "I thought you only cared about him now, and no longer care about how I feel."

The moment we enter the room, Wei Shao Er has been standing vigil next to the bed and she looks up in alarm. She rushes forward to greet Jiu Ye like a drowning person seeing a branch. Hope mixes with despair in her eyes, whereas I'm the opposite reaction. I don't even bow to her before I rush to the side of the bed.

He lays there quietly, his lips tightly pressed together and his brows furrowed with worry. It appears he has a lot on his mind. Since I've known him, he's been as bright as the sunshine, always so full of life and energy. This is the first time I've seen him like this, so still and seemingly helpless. I use my finger to rub his forehead, my nose starting to redden and before I

know it, my face is wet with tears “Qu Bing, Qu Bing.....Yu Er is here! I was wrong. I shouldn’t have engaged in a temper battle with you.”

Jiu Ye pressed his hand on Qu Bing’s wrist but he couldn’t reach a pulse. “Have the servants bring a basin of ice water, I need to clean my hands.” The maid flew out the door and then Jiu Ye wiped his hand on an ice cube and then dried it. He appeared to be calming himself down on the ice before once again placing his hand on Qu Bing’s wrist.

Wei Shao Er and I stare at Jiu Ye without blinking, unconsciously pleading with him to wake Qu Bing up. Jiu Ye closed his eyes and focused all his attention on his finger tips. Everyone in that room held their breaths, it was so quiet we could hear the ice in the basin melting. The more time that passed, the more my fear increased. Why did he need so much time? Jiu Ye’s expression was calm and I couldn’t tell what was happening. Finally Jiu Ye pulled his hand back and I stared at him. My voice was filled with abject fear and pleading anxiety “He’ll be fine, won’t he?”

Ju Ye’s eyes were as calm and impossible to read as ever, and he hesitated before nodding “He’ll be fine. I’ll do everything I can to make sure he wakes up.” My heart, which had been perched on the tip of a needle, finally returned to its normal spot. He looked at Qu Bing’s visage and pressed his ear to Qu Bing’s chest to listen for quite some time. He then placed his finger on Qu Bing’s wrist once more before asking “What did the Palace physicians say?”

Uncle Chen looked at a row of men standing to the side, and one white haired elderly gentleman stepped forward “All of us cannot diagnose the problem. His heartbeat is weak but it’s steady. Usually we can use medicine to shock him awake, but the General’s situation is beyond odd. Usually an unconscious person can be forced to drink medicine, but the General refuses to accept the medicine. We cannot force feed him, and acupuncture does not work either. We’ve flipped through all the books and cannot find a treatment.”

Jiu Ye nodded and turned to Wei Shao Er “General Huo is emotionally stressed, which is normally not a big deal. But this has caused

all his hidden ailments accumulated from years on the battlefield to arise. Because General Huo is different than a normal person, the split second before he tumbled off the horse, his self-preservation instinct is so strong that it's caused him to shut himself off from any outside attempts to force feed him medicine. Madam, the Palace physicians are right in their diagnoses, and they've tried all the treatments already. I can do no better. But...."

Wei Shao Er was so anxious her voice turned high pitched "But what?" Jiu Ye continued "I can try something different, and it's something I've only been researching and have never actually performed before." Wei Shao Er quickly asked him to explain. "A person has five senses, and taste is but one of them. The sense of touch, the skin is tied to all the major organs. If we can't get the medicine in through his mouth, we can try another entry point. Take off the General's clothes and lock him in an airtight room and use a steam method to boil the medicine and have it enter his body through his skin."

Wei Shao Er looked at the Palace physicians and they all exchanged looks before one spoke up "Steaming the medicine into the body would make the room exceedingly hot. From a medical standpoint, the heat is not good for the patient and might exacerbate the illness. But this method also sounds like it could work. We cannot authorize it and will need Madam to make the decision."

Wei Shao Er glared at them and then looked at Qu Bing with hesitation, unable to make up her mind right away. No one dares make a noise, afraid that if anything were to happen, they would be held responsible. Wei Shao Er looked at her husband for guidance, but since it's not his own son, he is anxious but still unable to step forward and says that he will support whatever she decides to do. I get up and bow to Wei Shao Er "I beg of Madam to please consent, the longer this drags out the worse it'll get."

Wei Shao Er's voice cracked "But what if Qu Bing gets worse?" I reply "If Jiu Ye says he can wake Qu Bing up, then he will wake Qu Bing up." Wei Shao Er still couldn't decide and I got more anxious. But right now I'm considered nobody to Qu Bing, and at this moment I realized how

important a proper title can be. Even though he's as important to me as my own life, I cannot speak up at this moment and can only beg and plead with Wei Shao Er.

Jiu Ye's eyes are filled with tender pity and he suddenly turned to bow to Wei Qing "What does the Great General Wei think?" Wei Qing, normally a man of few words, couldn't believe Jiu Ye turned to him to speak "Second sister, since things are what it is, we have no other choice. We have to take this risk, so let Mr. Meng perform his treatment! The Emperor is very concerned about Qu Bing's illness and Mr. Meng would never be anything but careful. He must have thought things through before giving his treatment suggestion." Wei Shao Er nodded her head, finally agreeing.

It's no wonder he's the man even Liu Che is wary of. Wei Qing said little but his every word was like a hidden knife. He made the decision but also placed all the risk on Jiu Ye, completely thorough. Jiu Ye ordered Uncle Chen to prepare everything. When the door to the room closed, I stood outside and just stared without moving. From morning until it was pitch black outside, there was still no movement in that room. After a long time, Jiu Ye asked for ice and it was passed inside to him.

Wei Shao Er was so tense her lips were colorless, and I walked over to her to offer my hand. She hesitated and then grabbed it, our hands are both icy cold. But when we held hands, a warmth slowly seeped through. In that moment, among so many people, we understand each other's pain.

She gripped my hand more and more tightly and her demeanor appeared to be shaky. She looked at me asking for some assurance, and I looked at her with the conviction that Qu Bing would wake up. She couldn't sustain herself any longer and put her head on my shoulder. My back was ramrod straight as I stared at that room. Qu Bing, you must be fine, nothing must happen to you!

The door silently opened and Jiu Ye came out with his face white and his lips blue. He grabbed the door weakly and nodded his head. Everyone cried out in happiness and Wei Shao Er rushed inside the room and then

she cried "Why is he not awake?" All the Palace physicians ran inside but I turned back to Jiu Ye. I discovered he had passed out in his wheelchair, and one middle-aged physician noticed as well and rushed over to Jiu Ye.

My heart was half ice cold and half burning up. The pain and the guilt was tearing me apart. I was in such a rush to see Qu Bing that I didn't even notice Jiu Ye had passed out. What must he had felt the moment he fainted?

"Congratulations, Madam. He's awake. Mr. Meng lit some sleeping incense when he was treating General Huo, so it'll take a bit of time for him to wake up. But right now he's just sleeping and no longer unconscious." Wei Shao Er was so happy her knees buckled and she sank to the ground. I hear that Qu Bing is fine and half of my heart calmed down, but the other half hurt even more. Jiu Ye was slumped in his wheelchair and his hands are so pale I can see the blue veins. I pick up his hands and it feels like ice "What happened to him?"

The middle-aged physician put down Jiu Ye's other hand "He's naturally of a weaker constitution than most people, and the steam inside that room was astoundingly hot. A normal person could barely withstand a few hours, plus he had to keep using ice to cool down the General's body temperature. The hot and cold mixed together, it was already a miracle he could endure it for so long."

I rub Jiu Ye's hands and use my mouth to breath warm air to try and heat it up. Uncle Chen bowed to the physician "Will doctor please treat Jiu Ye. When the General awakens he will surely greatly reward you." The physician responded "A doctor who risked his life to save another is something I have never seen before. I don't need you to ask me, I will do my best to treat him." I tell Uncle Chen "Please prepare the carriage, we need to take Jiu Ye back to the Shi Estate."

Uncle Chen turned to look at the sleeping Qu Bing "When the General awakens, he will surely be anxious to see you." I look at the crowd of people surrounding him, like stars around a moon, filled with royal relatives, doctors, and servants alike "I'll hurry back, but whether I'm here

or not makes no difference right now.”

Uncle Chen looked at Jiu Ye’s ashen white face and blue lips and sighed “Ms. Yu, please go with no worries! We will take good care of the young master.” When getting on the carriage, the servants want to help but I wave them off and gingerly carry Jiu Ye on the carriage myself. The physician followed “What splendid martial arts, you barely jostled the patient at all.” I force a smile “Thank you, and what is your surname?” He replied “I am Dr. Zhang, and we’ve actually met before. That day it was General Huo who summoned me to the Shi Estate to treat the young miss.”

I answer “So I’ve already burdened Dr. Zhang before.” He shook his head “With Mr. Meng’s medical skills, I was not needed. But having a chance to listen to him talk medicine is something I ought to thank you for.”

Dr. Zhang personally brewed medicine and helped me feed it to Jiu Ye. He also carefully told me and Tian Cao all the things we need to be aware of before finally departing. When I left here with Jiu Ye, he was perfectly fine, but he came back unconscious. Shi Buo was clearly not happy, but each time he wanted to say something to me, Tian Cao silently asked him not to.

Because I was worried Jiu Ye would need water or anything else, I stayed beside him while he slept fitfully on the pallet. It was like he was worried about things even in his dreams. His eyebrows would twitch and a look of pain would pass across his face.

This is the first time I’ve studied him in such close proximity, and it is also the first time he doesn’t try to conceal anything about himself by using pleasant smiles to hide his real feelings. I rest next to his pillow and start humming a herding song.

Jiu Ye’s furrowed brows start to loosen and his sleep deepens. I hum this ballad over and over and tears come to my eyes. This is a very popular Xiong Nu folk song that talked about a royal lady named Yi Zhu and a slave named Ba Ya Er and their love story. When I was a child, I often

heard Yu Dan's mother the Queen sing this song with a look of sadness and unshed tears. I didn't understand back then why the song initially had Yi Zhu staring at Ba Ya Er's back from a far away place, and ended up with Ba Ya Er staring at Yi Zhu's back from a far away place.

I feel a hand caressing my cheek and I immediately snap out of it, unsure of when I went into a daze. My face was resting on the pallet and at this moment Jiu Ye had turned on his side and his face was directly opposite mine. We can feel each other's breathing. His fingers were tracing my face, from the eyebrow to the eyes, the nose, the lips, the chin, as if he wanted to commit it to memory and carve it into his heart. His eyes were filled with earth shattering pain, rivers and oceans of regret and longing, of pain and agony.

I'm lured in by his eyes and my mind was shaken. He's always so calm and placid, all the sadness he usually brushes away with a smile. Right now in the depths of his back eyes I can see two little versions of myself, with my face shocked but stubbornly unmoving. He slowly pulled back his hand and smiled. It was the usual smile like a Spring breeze, sweeping away the stormy clouds to return everything to sunshine, but obscuring the things hidden in his eyes.

After some time, he smiled at me "Can you sing the ballad you were humming earlier again?"

I woodenly nod my head and clear my throat and sing it again. After my song has finished for some time, the two of us are still frozen to the spot. His voice was so low it was barely audible "Why was Ba Ya Er so stupid? Why did he never turn back to look at Yi Zhu? Why did he keep forcing Yi Zhu to try and read his feelings? Why couldn't he have told Yi Zhu how he really felt? He's smarter than the wiliest fox on the plains, so why couldn't he understand that Yi Zhu didn't care about his humble birth and was willing to endure hardship with him?"

I had thought he didn't understand the Xiong Nu language which is why I sang this song. I forgot how well-learned he was, and that during the heyday of the Xiong Nu power, all the Xi Yu kingdoms bowed

down to the Xiong Nu so the language was widely spoken in Xi Yu. I was so shocked I asked “You understand Xiong Nu? And you know the folk love story of Ba Ya Er and Yi Zhu?”

He hummed the last refrain “The cloud chased the moon and Ba Ya Er accompanied Yi Zhu. Ten thousand nightingales on the plains could not sing enough about their happiness.” His eyes stared at me without wavering “Even though Ba Ya Er did hurt Yi Zhu, but the ballad tells us that they did end up together happily ever after. Do you believe what this song said?” I don’t answer the question and tell him “I need to get going.”

He turned his head away from me and lightly said “I had hoped that I would never wake up, then you will stay here forever and take care of me. But then you would be worried and sad.”

All the tears I was supressing when I was singing came forth at last so I quickly turn around and wipe my tears “Please take care of yourself and get better. I’ll come visit you when I get a chance.” I finish talking and am about to walk out when he urgently grabbed my hand and said very slowly and carefully “Yu Er, tell me! Who do you care about more? Forget promises and vows. Without taking into account anything else, who do you think about just that little bit more. Who do you want to be with?”

I bit my lip and want to pull my hand back, but he refuses to let go. He asked the same question one more time, each word just as carefully spoken as before. I want to say something, but seeing his fatigue and worn out visage, I was torn between wanting to tell the truth and then not having the heart to tell him. I can’t say it out loud so I just jerk my hand out of his.

He sees me like this and the pain in his eyes is so visible, combined with so many other emotions. Finally it all just distills into dead silence. He suddenly let my hand go “Seeing you like this today, I actually already knew the answer. You can go now!”

I’m afraid to turn around and fly out of the room. I’m facing the cold bitter wind as I run into the dark night, my heart unable to calm down.

Chapter 29: Sorrow

My heart really hurts, so without considering the ramifications, I release a long howl to the moon. In a split second, all of Chang An breaks into a cacophony of dog barks and roosters crowing. In what was a dark house the lamplight is lit and people start talking.

I quickly tried to leave the scene of the crime without making any noise. As I took off running, I let out a small smile. A person ought to be able to find joy even during the sad moments. And if their lives are not filled with much happiness, people ought to learn to create their own joyful moments.

Sticking to the darkened corners of the streets, I clear my throat and let out another howl. The same reaction happens again. I howl to the East, I howl to the West, I turn the entire city of Chang An upside down with freaked out animals. The street starts to light up and even the guards at the government estates are nervous. Everyone comes out ready to capture a wolf. Some claim there are three or four, others say there are ten of them.

The beggars on the side of the streets become the most popular people in town. Crowds gather around them asking what they saw. Normally a beggar would never get so much attention, so they are all eager and excited to spout out and gesticulate as to what they saw. Their stories become more and more exaggerated and the crowds start to gasp in shock. Perhaps these days have been too quiet recently so people are not scared by their story and instead get more excited. They appear to be waiting for something exciting to happen.

My eyes shifted a few times and I thought that since I've already caused a commotion, might as well make it even bigger to make myself happier and make the crowds happier. I see a black-cloaked person walk past, and once I confirm the coast is clear, I jump down behind him and knock him out with a bat to the head. I take off his black cloak only to discover he's a government official. Oooooops, this is not ideal. This is more serious than I intended. Oh well! I already knocked him out, it's too

late for regrets.

I put on the cloak and tie a handkerchief around my head. I hid on a rooftop and howl once more before starting to run along the roof tops. I'm chased by a crowd of government officials behind me, and lined all along the streets are people watching this show. When I almost kick a guard off the roof, some of the spectators actually clap in excitement. A lone hero can't beat a hundred men, and the guards chasing me are increasing rapidly in numbers. It appears the entire guard retinue of Chang An is out to capture me.

Initially I wanted to taunt them a bit longer, but it turns out that some of them are actually not half bad at martial arts. In the beginning they were all randomly chasing me, but someone has taken charge and their pursuit has grown organized. I'm slowly getting chased into a dead end. Indeed I'm playing right under the nose of the Emperor! I'm impressed with their skill and hurry to find an exit. If I get captured, that ought to be interesting, but too bad I can't afford to take that risk right now.

Because I don't want to kill anyone, I withhold some of my strength and try to avoid them. I'm looking for a way out.....and I flip right into the backyard of the Huo Estate. The guards must know who owns this place so they don't follow me inside. I secretly stick my tongue out at them. Likely a bunch of high level government officials will be knocking on the door in a few minutes, and Uncle Chen can kiss his sleep goodnight.

I sneak into Qu Bing's room and peek inside. There are no maids keeping watch over him, he's just sleeping alone on the pallet. I'm feeling upset and worried. How could Uncle Chen be so careless and not take better care of him?

I walk next to the pallet and lean over to check on him, when he suddenly opens his eyes. I yelp in shock and he immediately pulls me into his embrace. I'm enveloped snugly in his arms, leaving me laughing as I hit his chest "How dare you surprise me! No wonder there wasn't a single maid around!"

He didn't laugh and just said very seriously "I've been waiting for you this entire time. If you didn't return by dawn, I was going to storm over there and grab you back." I humphed at him "You're a thief!" He laughed and kissed my forehead "That would make you the wife of a thief. Why are you dressed like this?"

I made a face at him and tried to struggle out of his arms. I took off the cloak and tossed it on the ground before removing the handkerchief tied around my head. "You're in trouble now. Maybe tomorrow someone will tattle to the Emperor that you are secretly protecting a thief. Tonight I managed to cause a commotion to lure every government official out looking for me."

He put his hands behind his head and laughingly asked "What did you steal?" I wrinkled my nose at him "Nothing, I just punked everyone for fun." He furrowed his eyebrow and indicated for me to come over. I crawl under the blankets and snuggle in his arms "You don't look like someone who was just ill. How are you this energetic? Are you uncomfortable anywhere right now?"

He frowned "Everything feels normal, but there is one area that's uncomfortable." I was immediately so nervous "Where? We'll summon the royal physician at dawn tomorrow. No, let's have Uncle Chen summon him right now." I was about to jump off the pallet when he grabbed my hand and then slowly slid it down past his stomach "This area is quite uncomfortable."

My hand could feel his arousal "You....." I was so mortified and annoyed that my face was beet red. He laughed and lightly murmured in my ear "How long as it been since you willingly snuggled with me? So there is something good that comes out of getting sick. If I knew this, I would have gotten sick earlier. Since it's such a rare occurrence for you to jump into my arms, if I didn't have the appropriate reaction, I would be insulting the "icy cold beauty" that is you."

I spit out "You're a lech!" He kissed my cheek and sighed "Yu Er, are you willing to bear my child? I can't marry you right now, but I'm going to

be yours for this entire lifetime. It's bound to happen sooner or later. If you don't care about official titles, I don't want to restrain myself anymore." I turn sideways to avoid his kiss and didn't have a chance to respond to his question when Uncle Chen was outside "Young master!"

Huo Qu Bing ignored him and continued to tease me and ask in a low voice "Yes or no?" I'm too afraid to breathe, worried that Uncle Chen will hear what is going on inside the room. But Qu Bing doesn't care the least, and the more nervous I am, the more it gets him all into it. He decided to just kiss me on the cheek with a loud resounding smack.

"Young master! Young....." Uncle Chen's voice trailed off into silence for some time before "Young master....."

Huo Qu Bing said in an exasperated voice "Why do people keep interrupting at the most crucial moment?" He called out "What?" Uncle Chen explained "The Guard Master asks to see you, saying a thief appears to have snuck into our estate. He wants the young master to investigate and I came to ask you what to do?"

Huo Qu Bing replied "What so hard you need to ask me? Can't you decide what to do?" Uncle Chen stammered "Our estate is protected no less securely than the Palace, anyone entering would encounter dozens of dogs. Plus today there are rumors of a wolf commotion in the city. So I was thinking.....thinking that....." I can tell he's having a hard time saying it so I help out "Uncle Chen, it's me. I snuck into the estate tonight."

Uncle Chen let out a sigh of relief "That was what I suspected, so I already sent the Guard Master home. But after that the an even higher official come by saying that a violent thief had knocked out the Crown Prince's tutor with a bat to the head. The tutor is furious and has vowed that the thief must be captured, otherwise he'll make sure the guard officials all get in trouble."

Huo Qu Bing laid down and with a lazy expression turned to look at me. He flicked me on the forehead and said with a laugh "Fine! I'll make a trip to the tutor's estate in a little bit. There must be an even more dire

situation involved, so tell me who else came by?"

I was already wondering why a high court official was all wrapped up tightly and wandering around Chang An late at night by himself. So this was what happened? I whisper in Huo Qu Bing's ear and he laughed and gave me a strange look, shaking his head indicating he didn't agree with me.

Uncle Chen piped up "Li Gan is here waiting for you, claiming he's here on orders of General Li as the Palace Commander to ensure the safety of Chang An. He asks for your cooperation to make sure the assassin is caught." Huo Qu Bing's expression turned cold "Li Gan is calling the person an assassin?" Uncle Chen softly answered "Yes."

The Palace Commander is in charge of the safety of the Palace, so if they are calling me an assassin, aren't they asserting that I was planning to assassinate the.....Emperor? I pitifully say "I think I'm in big trouble now. With such a huge mountain falling down on me, is Li Yan intending to crush me to death?" Huo Qu Bing immediately said "Li Yan? What do you mean by that?"

I cover my mouth and just stare at him, my eyes shifting but I don't answer his question. He shook his head "I'm not sure what is making you so worried." He turned to Uncle Chen "Since third brother Li has already guessed it's Yu Er, then don't lie to him. Tell him the truth – it was Huo Qu Bing and my woman who got bored tonight and decided to play a prank. I'm sorry we disturbed them. Right now we're resting on the pallet so if he wants to arrest someone tell him to barge right in. Since I've never seen the inside of a prison cell in Chang An, tell them I'm thanking them in advance for showing me around there."

I pull his robe "You can't say this, you can't....." Uncle Chen was outside and quiet for some time, and he finally said "Yes" and quickly left. From the sound of his, his footsteps are unsteady like he's drunk.

I lay down on the pillow and make a face "Huo Qu Bing, are you purposely messing with Li Gan or with me? Why do I feel like you're upset

with me?" He laughed "Half and half, but my annoyance isn't just regular annoyance, it's unsatisfied bedroom annoyance." He brushed my hand aside and kissed me on the nose "Li Gan is very thoughtful and this is a chess match he orchestrated. If I play the match with him, I might not win, so why not just play stupid and mess up his entire chess match. Let's see what he does about that? If he gets upset and makes one wrong move, we can use that to taunt him."

This man doesn't follow the rules of military tactics and he does things without following normal protocol. If I'm comparing shamelessness with him, I will clearly lose. I turn around and lay down to sleep, deciding to ignore him. He laughed "So you're just going to sleep?" I huff "It's almost sunrise and I've been getting exhausted on the rooftops of Chang An all night. If you don't let me sleep, I'm going back to my place."

He embraced me from behind and softly said "Go to sleep!" I smile and then ask "In the morning, are you really going to pay a visit to the estate of the Crown Prince tutor?" He laughed "You call me shameless, but your behavior was pretty low as well. He's the Crown Prince's tutor and not a random stranger. I ought to pay him a personal visit." Word is that the tutor has a shrew for a wife so he's found a beautiful and elegant mistress on the side. He tried to keep this a secret, but when I ran the dancing houses I learned about all the juicy scandalous details about the court officials.

When I heard from Uncle Chen that the guy I knocked out was the tutor to the Crown Prince, I immediately realized that he was sneaking home from his mistress's place. I gave Qu Bing an idea to send word to the tutor asking if his temper is more important, or his wife's temper? The tutor will obviously let this issue go rather than escalate it. Who cares about some thief if he's dealing with an irate wife. Too bad Qu Bing has decided to be a gentlemen on this matter.

My sleepiness hits and I yawn. He quickly says again "Go to sleep!" and I murmur a yes before falling into peaceful slumber.

.....

When I wake up it's already time for dinner, but Qu Bing is not home. Uncle Chen said he's in the Palace and sent word that he'll be late coming home so I should eat dinner first. I suddenly remembered that I left the house so quickly I didn't say anything to Hong Gu, so I decide to go back to Luo Yu House.

The moment I enter the house, Hong Gu walked up "The Shi Enterprises....." She hit herself on the forehead "It's not the Shi Enterprises anymore....Tian Cao sent word asking you to please visit the Shi Estate." I hesitated so Hong Gu urged me "They are insisting you please go, apparently Jiu Ye is very sick."

When I left last night he was not doing so well, so my heart remains concerned about him. I quickly say "I'm off to the Shi Estate. Please keep some dinner for me, and if nothing is terribly wrong, I'll be home shortly." Hong Gu smiled and said yes.

I arrive at the Shi Estate only to find Tian Cao sitting outside on a carriage waiting for me "I've been waiting for you! Jiu Ye is outside the city in the Qing Estate, I'll take you there right now." I quickly ask "What happened? If he's not well, how come he left the city?" Tian Cao sighed "Jiu Ye was always prone to colds and this time he's especially hit hard. He wanted to not worry you so he tried to pretend he was fine, but he lost consciousness shortly after you left. The royal physician was by and ordered us to move Jiu Ye to the Qing Estate."

My heart was aching. I can't pretend I don't know why he got to be so ill. To cut off an emotion is already such a painful process, why can't he stop trying to be considerate of me and start taking better care of himself? If something were to really happen to him, how could I bear it? How I could seek my own happiness if that happened?

It's a blanket of chilly white frost in Chang An, but the Qing Estate benefits from the hot springs nearby and already the first signs of Spring are appearing. Some flowers and greenery are sprouting but neither Tian Cao nor I are in any mood to appreciate it. I run straight for Jiu Ye's room. He was still unconscious and his forehead was burning hot. Sweat beaded

down his face and I took the handkerchief from the maid "Let me do it!"

I've switched many handkerchiefs but his body temperature still doesn't go down. His lips are starting to crack and I moisten a towel and gently wipe his lips. He's so feverish but he keeps calling out "Yu Er" and each time he called me I reply "I'm here." The pain in his face seems to lessen and he appears to smile. Tian Cao spoke up "Now you know why I insisted you come. Your presence makes a huge difference to Jiu Ye's illness."

Xiao Feng arrived and appeared to say something to Tian Cao, hopping around urgently. Tian Cao called me over but Xiao Feng wanted to object but Tian Cao ignored him. "Xiao Yu, I don't want to keep anything from you. General Huo has sent someone to the Shi Estate multiple times to look for you. And he's already been by personally even though it's the middle of the night. If you want to leave, I'll send someone to take you home."

After keeping vigil all night, I can see that it's almost sunrise. I'm so anxious with worry and exhausted that I simply sigh and walk back to the water basin to pour some cold water on my face. I look at the still unconscious Jiu Ye "No need. I'll stay here until Jiu Ye wakes up." It was until noon that Jiu Ye's fever finally went down and my tightly wound heart finally relaxed slightly.

Jiu Ye opened his eyes and when he saw me, he smiled "They finally found you. Where did you run to in Xi Yu? I've turned that place inside out and still I couldn't find a trace of you. Yu Er, please don't be mad at me. It's my fault. After I read all the handkerchiefs in your box, that was when I knew what a horrible mistake I made....."

I was so shocked I wanted to say something but the doctor next to me shook his head. I walked over and gently said to Jiu Ye "I'm going to get a drink of water and will be right back." Jiu Ye looked at me with worry and I smiled "I'll be back after getting a drink. I won't go anywhere." His nervousness eased and he nodded his head.

I walked outside and Tian Cao spoke up first “Didn’t his fever break? What’s going on? Why is Jiu Ye not coherent?” The doctor explained “Don’t worry. After a prolonged fever, the fever has broken but he’s not fully conscious yet. His mental energy is weak and he’s thinking based on what he wants to remember and not based on rational thought. He will naturally try to forget the bad memories and just remember what makes him happy. After a good sleep he’ll regain coherence. But right now Jiu Ye musn’t be stimulated with anything negative. His body and mental state are in a relaxed and safe place right now, but it’s also highly vulnerable to shock. If you aren’t careful, he can get worse. You guys just let him talk and follow along. Try to get him to sleep, and after he wakes up, he’ll be all fine.”

Tian Cao looked at me and I nodded back. I walked inside and saw that Jiu Ye was staring at the doorway the entire time. He saw me come in and his face showed his unfettered joy. It’s a happiness that isn’t hidden with any other emotion and seeing it so suddenly makes my heart jolt. I assist Jiu Ye to rest on a comfortable cushion and take the food from the maid to feed him. He indicated for me to open the window.

Outside the window is a flowing hot spring, and the hot steam makes it feel like we’re in a fairyland. “.....I heard that one time grandmother was playing the zither in this room and grandfather had to go discuss a business deal and had to leave. But he was reluctant to leave so he kept looking backward at grandmother as he walked out. So the servants call this corridor the “Turning Neck Corridor”, and when grandfather found out, he was happy rather than upset.....” I don’t know when the room emptied out until it’s just Jiu Ye and me left. Jiu Ye’s voice is the only sound in this otherwise silent room.

He held my hand “Grandmother wasn’t in the best of health and she died before I was born. I often think of my grandparents walking along this corridor holding hands. If my life was half of what my grandfather experienced, then it will be worth it. Yu Er, am I too late with these words? Will you still let me view the flowers with you?”

My hands were trembling but he held on tightly. I didn’t answer for the longest time and his eyes started to show despair so deep and thick it

could drown a person in it. It was so painful to see that I could feel my heart breaking into pieces. I nod my head with certainty “I’m willing. Once you are all better, we can go visit Tian Shan (the Sky Mountains) to see the snow lilies.”

My words are like a magic elixir and it calms the tempest in his eyes. His grip on my hands loosened and he started laughing with joy “The Heavens are indeed fair to me. Thank you for giving me Yu Er.” My eyes filled with tears. The Heavens, you are surely not fair. He lost his loved ones when he was young, he’s crippled, and even if he has all the riches in the world, it has turned into the world’s most vicious chain locking his freedom in a vise.

“Yu Er, are you crying? Did I make you cry again.....” I forced a smile “No, I’m happy. The doctor says you need to keep calm and get plenty of rest. Do you want to sleep now?” He reached out and wiped the tears from my eyes and pulled me into his tight embrace. He’s so forceful it feels like he wants to lock me in his embrace forever “Yu Er, Yu Er, Yu Er....let’s never be apart ever again. Since you left, I’ve hurried to do everything so I can disappear from Chang An. Once I arrange everything, we can go to Xi Yu. Buy two of the fastest horses and we can quickly and thoroughly disappear.”

“Yes” and my tears continue to fall on his shoulder. He continued “I’ve always wanted to be a real doctor. Once I settle everything in Xi Yu, why don’t we open a small clinic. I can treat patients and you can gather medicine for me. I’m sure business will be swell.” I reply “With your talent at healing, business will be so good we will barely have time to even have tea.” He countered “That won’t work. Patients are important but I want to spend time with you. Why don’t we hang a sign that we’ll only see twenty patients a day.”

“Okay. And if anyone forces you to see them, I’ll kick them out.” “We can build a cabin in the Sky Mountains where we can spend the Summers.” Everything sounded so real I laughed “In the Winter we can go see the volcanoes.” “Yu Er, the fish in the Gu Nai Shi Lake are supposedly quite delicious. I can grill some for you. You’ve never sampled my grilled fish, right? It’s a recipe I perfected from the classic texts. Rumor has it that

Huang Di (the first Emperor) himself ate it. I don't know if it's real or legend, but I'm sure the flavor is out of this world."

"Um hmm, I heard the herders say that the Gu Nai Shi Lake waters change color with the seasons. It changes from blue to green to almost white, almost twenty different colors. I visited twice with the wolf pack so I've only seen two colors." "Why don't we live on the lake for a year then, so we can see all twenty colors. Yu Er, where else do you want to go?"

.....

Jiu Ye fell asleep on my shoulder, his face relaxed and with a smile on his lips.

I gently place him on the pillow and turn around to look out the window. The sun is setting outside and the dusk is bathed in a blood red light. I turn back to look at Jiu Ye's happy visage and suddenly all the strength in my body disappears. I sink down to the ground and stare at Jiu Ye and start bawling. But I don't dare make any sound, so I bite down on my hands to keep myself from crying out. But my tears rush forward like an unending flood.

Dear Heavens, I pray of you, please be kind to him just this once. When he wakes up tomorrow, let him forget everything that happened today. Forget everything, forget everything.....

Chapter 30: Passion Dance

I have no idea how I managed to return home. My entire body feels empty and I'm so exhausted I just want to collapse. When I enter the room I discover that the ceramic appliances have all been swept on the floor. The entire floor is a mess and I sigh with a heavy heart. I turn and rush to the Huo Estate.

Uncle Chen sees me and immediately calls out "The young master rushed home yesterday from the Palace, stopping by Yi Ping Ju to buy a few of your favorite snacks. He was so happy to be able to make it home in time to join you for dinner. He saw you weren't here and I said I had sent someone to pick you up. He wanted to go pick you up personally. He was so excited when he left, but he didn't come home all night. I thought he spent the night at your place. But when he came home this morning at dawn, he didn't drink a sip of water or eat a morsel of food. He locked himself in his room and no one was allowed inside. Before you arrived, he just left the house with the worst expression on his face. I heard from Hong Gu that he didn't eat anything yesterday as well and spent the night waiting for you in your room."

Uncle Chen tried to stay mellow "Ms. Yu, Jiu Ye is indeed a good man, and we indeed owe him greatly....." and his face looked apologetic "But our young master is unwaveringly devoted to you. Because of you, he even turned down the Emperor's marriage decree. Other than the Empress and the General Great Wei, he's upset all the other relatives in the family. I genuinely am sorry to you for what I did and I don't want to say anymore. But.....ay!"

Qu Bing just got better, and despite looking like he's completely recovered, there is no way he can endure this type of self-torture. Because I was so worried, my tone of voice was overly stern with him "Why didn't any of you counsel him?" I said it and immediately realized how silly I was, Qu Bing would never listen to anyone's advice. I apologize to Uncle Chen "I'm sorry for saying that. Do you know where Qu Bing went?" He shook his head "He wouldn't let anyone follow him. He might've gone to see his mother, or maybe to the Princess's estate, or perhaps to General

Gong Xun's estate. Or somewhere to drink."

I turn around and head out "I'll go find him." From Princess Pingyang's estate to General Gong Xun's estate to the Chen estate, plus all the dancing houses and drinking halls in Chang An, he's nowhere to be found. When I leave Tian Xiang House, it's already dark of the night. Standing under the lantern outside Tian Xiang House, I stare into the pitch black night. Qu Bing, where are you?

I suddenly have a sliver of hope and wonder if maybe he went home. I hurry back to the Huo Estate but the door guard sees me and shakes his head. "The General has not returned yet. Housekeeper Chen has sent people searching for him but no one can find him." I turn to walk back into the night without saying a word. Suddenly I think of one place he might be. It's just past the 15th of the month and there is a round moon in the sky. It shines a silver light on a mountain full of Lover's Vines.

I follow the side of the Lover's Vines and run around the mountain side. "Qu Bing!" "Qu Bing!".....The sound of my voice reverberates through the canyons, tossing and turning, but it still remains just my voice. From the bottom of the mountain to the top, the entire mountain responds to my calls with only the sound of the wind rustling through the Lover's Vines. Huo Qu Bing, where are you? Huo Qu Bing, are you leaving me?

Since two days ago, my entire being has been strung tighter than a taut string and I've not even rested properly. I can no longer endure the weight of my sorrow and I sink down on the ground in exhaustion. My face contorts into a grimace and I start making this noise that sounds like I'm crying and laughing at the same time.

During this period of time, I was like a soybean between two rock plates. I was about to be crushed into a million tiny pieces under the pressure of their two rocks. Those two rocks are in pain, but did they not know my pain?

How can Huo Qu Bing not understand. Since long ago he has been to me the bone of my bones, the blood of my blood. If I wanted to pick Jiu

Ye, I would have left a long time ago and not wait until now.

A pair of hands pulled my hands away from my face and dark eyes stared at me without blinking. He said nothing, just staring at me. I thought he wouldn't show up so I blink a few times to make sure he's here. I dumbly ask "Do you still want me?" In his eyes flashed pain and joy and he said each word carefully "Before I had you I said I would never let you go. Now that I have you, I will say with even more certainty...I am never letting you go."

My heart, which has been perched on a precipice, finally returned to its normal spot. I let out a relieved sigh and my entire body fell forward into his arms "I'm so tired. So tired. So tired! Please don't be mad at me. Jiu Ye, in order to treat your illness, he's got very sick. So I stayed there....." He suddenly kissed me and stopped what I was saying. It was so passionate it felt almost rough.

I was so fatigued that my brain wasn't working so I ask stupidly "Don't you want to know what happened?" His eyes are no longer somber like before and was now twinkling again. He smiled and kissed me again "All I need to know is that I am the only person who can do this." He hesitated for a moment "Since you came back, he must be fine now?" "The fever has broken and the doctor says that the fever, though dangerous, helped shake away the chill in his body. He'll be fine after a period of careful recovery."

He stared at me "Yu Er, I'm sorry. No matter what, you two met first. And in this entire situation, I was the one who didn't do things in a completely honorable manner. I'm also to blame for the situation today. A person is not like a plant or a tree, how can feelings be swept so away so easily? Even regular friends wouldn't want to see each other in emotional pain. Plus there are emotional knots that only time can untangle, and are easier said than done."

Even though Uncle Chen apologized already, but that day Huo Qu Bing just left without showing a shred of remorse. Because of his sudden illness, I didn't want to mention the unpleasantness of the past, so I chose

to let it go. This is the first time he's said something like this. He's not pressuring me, but rather giving me as much time as I need. He has chosen to trust me. My heart swelled with emotion, and any lingering frustration in me just dissipated completely. I reach forward and tightly embrace him. There is nothing I need to say, my actions have conveyed to him my response. He sighed with happiness and tightly embraced me back.

Our bodies were tightly pressed against each other and suddenly I felt something hard pressing against me. Our tender emotions suddenly morphed into a heady mood and he shifted his body and apologized "I wasn't thinking anything at all, it simply had a mind of its own."

I've never seen him slightly shy like this and all I can do is laugh. He was tense for a moment before lowering his head and nibbling on my neck "Yu Er, I really want you. Are you willing?" I bury my face in his chest and softly laugh, not answering his question. He also laughed "So does that mean yes? Yu Er, what if you get pregnant?"

I answer confidently "So what! If we have a baby together, then we'll have a baby. It's not like we don't have the means to raise a child."

I thought he would be happy, but instead he grows silent. His face is expressionless and he calmly asked me "Even if you get pregnant I still can't marry you. Do you know what that means? Do you know how people will talk about you?" I nod my head and he picked me up in one swift move and turned towards the deeper part of the mountain. I was confused, why wasn't he headed back to the estate? I thought to myself that there is nothing in the world this man won't dare do, and I suddenly lost all color in my face "What are you doing? You can't possibly be thinking of doing that.....there?"

He smiled like this was perfectly normal "My Yu Er knows me so well! There is a hot spring over there and we won't be cold if we are in it. Between the Heavens and the earth and the water, can you imagine what it will be like? It will surely be much more interesting than in a bedroom. Plus I've been so pent up for so long, now that we've decided, I don't want to wait another moment longer."

"But....but the sun is almost rising!" He gently placed me on a rock next to the hot spring and was taking off my clothes and answering me "Isn't that even better? At the time when day and night meet, the books say that it is when the yin and the yang converge. Remember those books you asked me to get for you? It states that this is the ideal time for consummating a relationship....." He was still talking when he was already pulling me into the water and his voice trailed off.

He was afraid I would be cold so he pulled me in quickly. He still had a circlet around his hair so I reached over and plucked it off. His hair spilled around his face in the water and suddenly this image seems so familiar to me. I can't help but smile. He startled for a moment, and then reacted by pulling me in for a deep kiss. It was such a long kiss that we are both adept at martial arts but we're still out of breath by the time we emerge from the water and break apart.

He laughed "I had almost forgotten my wish that way. That day in the water, all I wanted was to kiss you. But you were so feisty. All I did was hold your hand and you almost unmanned me. Yu Er, if you had really kicked me that day, wouldn't you be regretting that right now?" I humph at him "I would never regret it."

"Then I'm the one who regrets it. I regret you so were close that day but I couldn't do anything. But today I can....." and he laughed and make an expression like a wolf spotting a snack. He pulled me in and his kisses were raining all over me, on my face, on my neck, on my chest.....

.....

The royal physician said that Qu Bing was all recovered now and everything was fine. But he waited an entire day before prescribing the medicine, which wasn't even medicine, but just some reminders to eat normally. Why Dr. Zhang took one day from diagnosing Qu Bing to prescribing his treatment is something that Uncle Chen and I both understand but neither want to mention it in front of Qu Bing. [Dr. Zhang clearly consulted Jiu Ye and gave him the diagnosis, and it was Jiu Ye who prescribed the treatment.]

When Dr. Zhang was leaving, he saw me holding back what I wanted to say and he understood enough to say casually “Yesterday I had a talk with Jiu Ye about medicine. Compared to him, all my learnings appear meaningless....” I understand he’s telling me that Jiu Ye must be better now. If time can heal a person physically, time can surely heal a person emotionally. Right?

I slowly walk into the room and from the window I can see Qu Bing studying the prescription. He hears my footsteps and look up towards me with a smile. I want to return his smile but I can’t. I just hurry my steps and walk into the room. He puts my hand firmly in his to warm it up. The warmth in his hand slowly chases away the chill in my heart as well, and I turn around and grab his hands tightly, giving him a warm smile.

Qu Bing appears to realize something, and then he promptly acts like he has no clue. He looks at the prescription and lets out a long sigh, clearly not intending to follow it “I can’t eat this, I can’t eat that. There isn’t much left for me to eat then.” He saw me glaring at him and he quickly changed expressions and sidled up next to me with a goofy smile “Don’t be mad! Don’t be mad! If I can sample you everyday, then I’ll surely.....” Before he finished what he was saying, he was flying out the door and ducked to avoid a vase thrown at his head.

The vase shattered at the door and some of the maids are so frightened they immediately kneel down. He smiled at me through the window “I’ve got to go to the Palace for a bit. I’ll be back soon.” I chase after him “Wait, I have something to ask you.” He didn’t turn around but just waved his hand “I know what you’re worried about. It’s not like we haven’t snuck into the royal grounds before. That day we were even caught by the Emperor himself. If they want to tattle on us, let them. The Emperor won’t care at all.....” His voice trailed off as he disappeared from sight. I think about it, and realize that Li Gan doesn’t have any solid proof anyway. There is really not much to be afraid of at this point.

I turn around and the two maids Qing Wu and Xiang Die are still kneeling there “Why are you still kneeling? Hurry and get up.” The two maids check to make sure Huo Qu Bing has walked away before patting their chests and getting up. Xiang Die moves fast and has grabbed a broom

and is sweeping up the broken vase shards while saying "I've been a servant since I was small and have gotten used to kneeling as the first response when I hear my masters throwing things. My second response is saying "your servant I deserve to die." This happens regardless of whatever was happening in the room to cause the throwing things, which we know nothing about."

I laugh "Why are you all so afraid of the General? I have never seem him punish a servant." Qing Wu smiled but said nothing, while Xiang Die thought about it "Yeah! He really has never punished us before. I don't know, we're just scared. I hear other servants all hope to serve a young master who might like her and make her a concubine. But in our estate this has never happened. We are all just serving the General....." Xiang Die suddenly turned red when she realized what she was saying.

I hid my laughter "I'm going to tell the General all of this." Xiang Die and Qing Wu both get up and come plead with me, so I clear my throat "I'll keep quiet about this, but you have to do as I say from now on." Qing Wu quietly replied "Wonderful miss, don't we already do everything you want. Whatever you ask us we candidly reply. But when the Madam asks us, we try not to say too much and the things we have to answer we try to keep it short."

I sighed and hugged them both "Both sisters are good hearted, taking care of someone like me without any family. Thank you dear sisters. If you're done cleaning, let's go to Yi Ping Ju to eat." They smile and nod their heads. Xiang Die sighed "You! You're mean one moment, tender the next. No wonder even someone like the General doesn't know what to do with you."

I'm smiling but inside my heart I sigh. These two maids are hand selected by Uncle Chen to serve Qu Bing, and they are really good to me. But everyone else in the estate, because of Wei Shao Er and Gong Xun Aou and those folks, are polite to me on the surface but who knows what they are thinking deep down. Since Qu Bing's illness, when Wei Shao Er sees me there is less animosity from her, but she is still very cool towards me. I rather not seek out unpleasantness so I try to avoid her when I can. I figure she also doesn't want to see me, so the two of us rarely interact.

My relationship with Qu Bing is so obvious it doesn't even need to be explained. From the Emperor on top all the way down to the lowest foot soldier in the army, everyone knows I'm his girl. Huo Qu Bing has never tried to hide it, and with his close friends and subordinates like Zhao Puo Nu, he treats me like I'm his wife. Even then, everyone pretends that they have no clue what is going on. From the Emperor on top all the way down to the lowest servant in the estate, everyone treats me like a young maiden.

They pretend as if I'm just an innocent maiden Qu Bing brought out one day to hang out with, and if they all closed their eyes to go to sleep, the next day I will have disappeared. From Winter until Spring, from Spring until Summer, with each night of sleep, I still continue to appear before them the next day. And they still stubbornly refuse to acknowledge me.

When the Palace holds a banquet, I rarely attend. But this time it is for the Empress's birthday and she wants Qu Bing to bring me along. Even though she says nothing, but her little gesture such as this is like a tacit recognition of my relationship with Qu Bing. It was due to her influence that her siblings held back their dislike of me. She made my life easier, and for that I am grateful. Usually I'm dispirited when I go to the Palace, but today I purposely get all dressed up.

I arrange a Han hairstyle and use a popular Han accessory to secure my hair. I braid a purple crystal hair accessory through my hair and it glistens as it peeks out from under my dark locks, appearing like stars in the dark night. The largest crystal is the size of a thumb and hangs right over my forehead.

My outfit is also in the popular Chang An style, but I change it up a little. On top of the silk I add a thin layer of gossamer which gives it an illusion of depth and airiness. When I move it looks even more alluring. When Qu Bing saw me, his eyes lit up and he smiled "I always thought you are the most beautiful when you wear the Xi Yu outfits, but it's clear you look just as lovely wearing a Han style attire. Clearly you just never made the effort in the past."

When we enter the Palace, the Empress is seated on a dais receiving

the well-wishes of hundreds of courtiers. Qu Bing tried to pull me up to wish her a happy birthday but I stubbornly refused. “You go ahead. My presence is enough for the Empress to know my heart. If you’re so public with me here, it will make things difficult for the Empress.” Qu Bing looked somber “Sometimes I wish you were stupider and not as considerate of others. That way you won’t have to endure this by yourself.”

I look towards the Crown Prince’s tutor and his shrew wife, who are currently bowing to the Empress “Like them? Is that happiness? Everyone sees them as a couple and compliment them, but I can care less about that.”

Huo Qu Bing released my hand and went up to greet the Empress. Once the banquet started and people were already dining, Li Yan finally arrived. She looked tired and in her royal attire it made her look precious. She passed by and everyone held their breaths, afraid of one gust of air might harm this delicate extraordinary beauty.

The formerly raucous banquet turned silent because of her entrance and we can all hear the sound of her skirts swishing as she walked and her jade pieces clicking against each other. She glided in front of the Empress and knelt down to bow. Empress Wei smiled “No need! You’re not feeling well, a formal bow is not needed. I’ve received your wishes.” But Li Yan still formally bowed her head before getting up.

When she went to sit down, Liu Che naturally helped her into her seat. He said something to Li Yan and she furrowed her eyebrows and shook her head. Liu Che gave her a smiling look that said he was going to let her be. He turned to Empress Wei, and though he was still smiling, his eyes no longer had the look of tender caring. In the eyes of the public, Li Yan went from acting like she didn’t want to steal the Empress’s thunder to now showing clearing to the courtiers who was more important in the eyes of Liu Che.

I looked around the banquet. How many people here want the future Emperor to be Liu Bu (Li Yan’s son)? Or how many just want to see the Wei family tumble from power so they can win in the aftermath? Those who support the Wei family are obvious and a powerful lot, but there are a

clear target for those who want to help the Li family, since they can operate under the shadows.

My eyes meet Huo Qu Bing's and he mouthed the words "You're the most beautiful" to me. I pout at him and act all disbelieving of his clearly false words, but inside I feel full of sweetness and contentment.

Li Guang Li was watching my silent interaction with Huo Qu Bing and he scoffed loudly. He got up and addressed the Emperor and Empress "The various Xi Yu kingdoms have sent their twelve best dancing girls to perform a Xi Yu dance especially choreographed for the your highness's birthday." Liu Che smiled and looked at the Empress, who announced that they can perform.

Even though it was supposed to be a Xi Yu dance, because it is intended for the Empress, it incorporated more Han flavor and tempered the usual free-spirited passion of the nomadic people. The dance is graceful and the lead dancer is a tall woman who dances like a butterfly, her every move seemingly effortless. I can't help but nod my head, what a truly top-notch dancer. To my surprise, I see Li Yan also nodding her head and our eyes meet for the first time tonight. Her eyes are clear like a lake in Autumn, like one can see into the depth of her soul. I remember the first time we met and how her eyes were rich with emotion. She's like a completely different person now.

She suddenly smiled and gave me a pitying look while shaking her head. I wanted to smile back at her, as if asking her which of the two of us is more deserving of being pitied? But then I realized what a pointless exercise it was. Why do we need to keep pressuring each other? I turned away and stopped looking at her. When the crowd began to heartily applaud is when I snap back to attention. Liu Che was quite pleased and offered to reward the dancers.

Empress Wei was about to say something when Li Yan interjected "These dancers came all the way from Xi Yu hundreds of miles to reach the Han dynasty. They are all alone without any support. There is no reward you can give them greater than giving them a family. Since the

most eligible men in Chang An are all gathered here today, why doesn't the Emperor play matchmaker today and give them each a home."

A dancer's life is not forever and they need to find a safe harbor when they are still young. They are bound to a life as a concubine or even worse. If they can give birth to a son or child, in this foreign place they might have a chance to find some security. All the dancers brightened up with hope to hear this, but the lead dancer just took a quick survey of the entire banquet.

Liu Che saw all the girls light up with hope and he looked rather tender, turning to give Empress Wei a smiling look. Empress Wei appeared to remember something and her face turned red and she lowered her head. Li Yan immediately averted her eyes and looked towards the sky. Li Gan, who had been secretly staring at her, spilled the wine in his cup when his hands shook.

Liu Che turned to the Xi Yu dancing girls "I've heard that the Xi Yu ladies use horse racing to show their affection to the man they desire. They can also use dance to convey their interest. I want to emulate the Xi Yu customs today, and I hereby allow you each to pick the man you want."

A song started up and this time it's a genuine Xi Yu tune. It's immediately passionate and wild, the dancers turning sultry and limber as their bodies react to the music. Li Yan turned to smile at me and my heart chilled. I was wondering why she was doing all this. Now that Liu Che as given a royal decree that these ladies can choose, if one of the girls chooses Huo Qu Bing, then.....

Last time Huo Qu Bing opposed Liu Che's wishes with an excuse that he won't start a family until the Xiong Nu are eradicated. But today Liu Che has told the entire court and the Xi Yu dancers that he will let them pick. If Huo Qu Bing were to oppose him again in public..... I refuse to think any further, just gripping my skirt tightly and staring at the dancers.

Huo Qu Bing has clearly figured out Li Yan's intentions as well and he got up to leave. But two girls had already danced right up to him and blocked his path. Huo Qu Bing's demeanor turned cold and he returned to

his seat with a small smile and started to drink, paying no attention to the two girls dancing in front of him. I let out a sigh of relief that there is still time. If Huo Qu Bing isn't planning to accept both of them, then these two girls need to first use dance to determine a victor between them.

Li Guang Li's expression turned ugly and jealous. I realized now that neither of these two girls were in cahoots with them in advance. They really just both want Huo Qu Bing. I turn to stare at the two girls with an exasperated expression, not sure if I should be proud or worried. The lead dancer is the most beautiful and eye catching one and all the young men and old lechers alike have clearly been eyeing her. Right now she starts to dance in tune to the music and moving towards Huo Qu Bing. The atmosphere in the entire banquet grows more excited.

A few people who have no inkling of what is happening start cheering "Such a beauty surely can only match with a true hero." I don't know if they are just brown nosing to Huo Qu Bing or seeking their own demise. A row of military officials seated next to Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing stare coldly and dispassionately at this scene, not even paying attention to dancing girls who are before them. Li Guang Li and his toady ministers try to fan the flames so that the mood in the banquet is the extreme of hot and cold coming from the two sides.

The other two girls see the lead dancer and grow embarrassed and frustrated. But they cannot compete with her so they twirl away. The lead dancer smiles like a flower and her beauty flutters with her every dance step. She brushes over Huo Qu Bing, who continues to quietly and calmly drink his wine.

The moment she kneels before Huo Qu Bing and offers him a drink is the moment she has made her selection. I can't worry about anything anymore, I have to stop this now. I turn to meet Ri Chan's eyes and he nodded his head.

I take off my shoes and put my wrist bells on my ankle. I slowly stand up and clap loudly three times. I disrupt the Xi Yu tune and everyone turns to look at me. Huo Qu Bing looks stunned but I just smile and wink at him.

A fast and carefree tune comes from Ri Chan's short flute, akin to a feisty horse running through the plains, or a small bird gliding through the air. I follow the music and dance towards Huo Qu Bing. In every beat of the song, I stomp my foot and the bells add a new cadence to the rhythm. In the beginning I wasn't quite ready yet so I make a few mistakes, which causes the dancing girls to titter. I glare at them and make a face. Humph! If they haven't danced for seven or eight years like me and still dance as well as I'm doing, then I'll let them make fun of me.

My dancing becomes smoother and the wild abandoned sensation of dancing on the plains returns to my body. Plus I know martial arts, so my dancing is even more light and controlled than the average dancer. The passion dance of a Xiong Nu girl, I may not be perfect at it, but it's riveting nonetheless. Huo Qu Bing smiled and downed his wine, staring at me with unfettered joy and pride.

Because it was so unexpected, no one at the banquet knew how to react, just staring at me with their mouths open. It was dead silent. The bells on my ankles are crisp and clear, like the laughter of a young girl floating in the wind. It makes a person turn mellow and content.

The lead dancer quietly looked at me for awhile and then smiled at me before changing her dance steps. It was also a Xiong Nu dance. We dance around each other in front of Huo Qu Bing, who has stopped drinking and appeared to be genuinely enjoying watching me dance, and then watching her dance, almost like he was trying to decide which girl was better. This person was like the grass on the plains, turning livelier under the basking sunlight. I'm secretly stewing inside so I act even more cheerful. I turn towards him and use my flowing skirts to hide that fact that I'm launching a kick towards him. Too bad he was anticipating it and his hand was right there to grab my foot.

The tune from the flute becomes more urgent but I remain standing in place with a strange stance and a smile, moving my upper body in sync with the music. Thank god Ri Chan is the one accompanying me with the music, because he sees something is odd with me and immediately his tune slows down. That in turn causes the leader dancer to be caught off guard and she misses a few steps and almost slips. Everyone turns to look at her

and forgets about me standing there all weird.

The moment she regains her balance she shoots an angry look over at Ri Chan playing the flute. To her surprise, she sees not an ordinary musician but a dashing richly attired young man. His wavy hair and high nose reveals that he's also from the desert region. Ri Chan makes a slight apologetic bow to her and she suddenly turns red faced but flips her hair at him. I'm really losing my ability to keep a smile plastered my face. Even though there are dances where the feet don't move and only the upper body sways to the rhythm, but right now.....

Huo Qu Bing sees that my gaze directed at him is growing decidedly chilly so he smiles and squeezes my foot one more time before releasing it and returning to his drinking without a care in the world.

The song continues but both the dancer and I are flustered and our dancing gets sloppy. Her face is red and my face is burning up, and we accidentally bump into each other while dancing. That startles me back to being alert and I turn and shoot Huo Qu Bing the evil eye. How dare he try to tease me at a time like this? But he continues to look at me with amusement and a wry smile.

The dancer also regains her mental clarity again and resumes her powerfully seductive dancing. I sneak a peek at her, deciding whether I should do something sneaky and injure her otherwise I couldn't possibly out-dance her. But everyone was staring at me, especially with Li Yan here, there was no way I could get away with it.

Ri Chan's melody suddenly stopped, and when it resumed it was a different song. It was a popular love song from the plains that is sung when a man is professing his desire for a woman. The bells on my ankle lose their beat and the dancer also stops for a moment. She turns to look at Ri Chan with a look of surprise and joy, and everyone else looks around in confusion, unsure of what the heck is happening tonight. Did everyone suddenly turn randy or went crazy with lust?

I look at Ri Chan with a questioning look but he ignored me,

continuing to look only at the dancer. She stared at Ri Chan and then back towards Huo Qu Bing, and then back at me again. She suddenly made up her mind and with a few quick steps she was standing in front of Ri Chan's seat. She knelt down in front of him, indicating that she had made her choice.

Everything happened so fast that Li Guang Li stood up with look of pure rage but Li Yan quickly chimed in before he could speak "Congratulations to you both!" Li Guang Li looked at his sister's expression and sat down stiffly. This smart dancer changed her mind at the last minute, deciding to gamble her life and her future on Ri Chan. He will not disappoint her. If he is around for one day, then he will take care of her for one day.

I bow towards Huo Qu Bing and turn to return to my seat. Everyone stared dumbly at me when Li Yan laughed "Jin Yu, you randomly went up and danced, and now you're just going back to your seat without an explanation. Where do you think you are right now?"

I exchange a look with Express Wei and we understand each other. Since Li Yan is not giving me an inch and wants to pressure me, then I won't keep backing down. I bow to her and say very clearly "This place is of course the birthday banquet that the Emperor planned for the Empress." Li Yan fumed to hear what I said but she had no response. No matter how much she is loved by the Emperor, she is still the concubine to the Empress being the first wife. She must always bow down to the Empress, so this place isn't up to her to say anything about what just happened.

Liu Che coolly looked around and when he heard what I said, he looked at Empress Wei and then at Huo Qu Bing before laughing "Jin Yu's dance was also quite good, she ought to be rewarded as well." The Empress gently agreed.

A tempest hidden under a passionate dance performance has been averted for now. But what even bigger potential storm will come of this music and dance performance Ri Chan and I put on today? The competition between the Wei family and the Li family is gradually out in the open. Liu

Che may have favored the Li family tonight, it was his way of using his imperial power to even the odds. Just like how he used the Wang family to defeat the Bao family, then then he used the Wei family to defeat the Wang family afterwards. The time has now come for the too powerful Wei family.

The carriage has been traveling for some time but all Huo Qu Bing does is stare at me and smile. When we enter the room, he takes off his robe and keeps smiling nonstop. I'm finally had enough of his smiling "You're not thinking about how to battle Li Yan, instead you're just laughing for no reason. Who knows what tricks she has up her sleeve next."

He let out a long sigh and laid down on the pallet, crossing his hands behind his head, his expression one of contentment "I'm looking forward to her tricks. Hopefully it'll be more of what happened tonight." I huff at him "Yes! In front of an entire court of scholarly and military officials, a few girls vying for your attention is definitely something to be proud of, something to crow about!"

He still had a smile and appeared to be reminiscing "It's definitely worth reliving in my mind. If it wasn't for them, I never would have known that you were nervous about me. And I could have never imagined that you would perform a passion dance for me."

I lifted my head and rolled my eyes, giving him two fake ha ha laughs "I sure am nervous about you!" His lazy attitude is really annoying me so I lean in and wrap my hands around his throat to pretend to strangle him "If you dare to touch inappropriately in public again, I will nervous you to death!"

His one hand reached out to tickle me and his other hand tucked me into his arms "Do you mean that as long as it's not in public, I can do whatever I want? I can touch you inappropriately? Then I guess I'll go right ahead then."

Qing Wu and Xiang Die had just walked in with the night wash when they saw us entwined together in a very passionate embrace. Xiang Die

dropped everything she was holding while Qing Wu actually managed to keep her cool and just bowed low and apologized before pulling Xiang Die and running out of the room.

Oh my god! I'm done for! I'm so embarrassed, how can I face them tomorrow? I glare at Huo Qu Bing but all he does is release the bed curtains with one sweep of his hand.

Chapter 31: Deployment

Myabe because it is the Winter and it's cold outside, but I've suddenly turned lazy and always eating. Sometimes I think of a delicious food and I can't sleep at night wanting to eat it. Huo Qu Bing orders the kitchen to add a talented night shift chef so that I can eat anything I want during the night.

Even though he offered to keep me company if I'm bored eating by myself, but during the day he has to train the army and then attend court, so I don't want to make him even more tired. I quietly sneak out to eat and then slip back when I'm done. He's used to me moving next to him when I sleep, so when I leave I try to be fleet and he almost never notices. But when I return, because it's so cold outside and my body is still chilly when I slip under the warm blankets, he always drowsily pulls me into his warm embrace despite the fact that I try to avoid making him cold with my cold body. His every move is unconsciously done, and that makes me feel a heart full of warmth.

Huo Qu Bing said he would give me time, and he stops doing or saying anything intended to gauge my feelings. Sometimes when I'm zoning off, he would never be like before and get angry or try to test me, but instead he would walk away and gave me privacy and space to work things out by myself.

In the past when I was feeling sad, I would lament the Heavens for never taking care of me. I was abandoned by my parents at birth, which isn't that bad since I never had them so I can't say I ever lost them. But then I met Papa, and right when I'm being pampered and cared for, turning into a real person and loving him back, the Heavens take my Papa away in the blink of an eye. My childhood playmate died, and the person I admired and revered caused my Papa to kill himself. It was impossibly cruel.

I endured a lot of wandering in the endless yellow sand of the vast desert but it was not hard. What was hard was coming to Chang An and discovering the first blush of love of a young girl's heart. If the meeting by the Yue Ya Spring was just a random encounter, then reuniting in Chang

An felt like Heaven was deliberately playing a trick on me. I asked myself many times during that period – why did fate let us meet, but then turned all my longing into emptiness? I felt like the Heavens were tormenting me for their own sport.

But now, laying in Huo Qu Bing's embrace, watching him sleep, I think to myself that the Heavens gave him to me. I know now that Heaven does care about me. Even though there is this and that between us, even though he cannot marry me.

I grab his hand, and even though he is sleeping, he subconsciously grabbed my hand back. I pick up his hand and kiss it. If our hands are tightly holding each other's, then there is nothing we can't overcome. Not Xi Yu, not Chang An. Whether it is the battlefield or the Palace, not even if it's life or death.

Huo Qu Bing already attended court and has returned, but I am still snuggled under the covers. He tapped me on the forehead and sighed "When I was in the army base, I heard the old-timers talk about how a woman changes after she's married so she's like two completely different people. I didn't believe then, but seeing you these days, I've come to accept that truth. The sun has already turned towards the West and you still haven't woken up. Aren't you hungry?"

I curl under the blankets and don't move "I ate something earlier but then I felt lazy again and I don't feel like moving." He stuck his hand into the blanket and I try to avoid his icy paw. He tried to ice me again so I quickly sit up. He grabs some clothes for me "Get up! Yi Ping Ju has introduced new dishes and Zhao Puo Nu says it's very tasty. Let's go try it out." I swallowed and immediately got my energy up. He looked at me and shook his head "Is there anything else in your brain these days other than eating?"

I cock my head and think, giving him a sultry and pouty look "There is something else." He smiled and said in a very soft and gentle voice "What is it?" I said in all seriousness "Drinking! The leek soup I had last night was so delicious!" His smile froze and he swatted me on the head,

saying in an exasperated tone “Go wash up!”

The moment we step into Yi Ping Ju I see Jiu Ye. He’s wearing a blue robe and is as pure as the first snow on a mountain top. He’s listening to Tian Cao talk and smiling warmly, though it hides a faint melancholy. The moment he sees me, his eyes flash pain, and my footsteps stop of its own accord. I can’t move forward, I can’t move back. I turn to look at Huo Qu Bing with a worried expression, and even though he’s not looking peachy, he turns to smile warmly at me “If you don’t want to eat, we can go home.”

His warm smile sweeps away all my lingering shadows and clears my heart. I can’t keep using avoidance. I can’t keep running away every time I see Jiu Ye, that is not fair to Qu Bing. I smile at Qu Bing “I want to eat” and his grip on my hand tightens once and his eyes light up.

Tian Cao stood up and bowed to Huo Qu Bing while Jiu Ye smiled and welcomed us to sit down with them. Tian Cao asked “Xiao Yu, what do you want to eat?” I laughed “Qu Bing said he was bringing me here to sample new dishes. What are they called?” and I turned to look at Qu Bing. He furrowed his brows “I forgot their names. No matter! Tell them to bring every one of their new dishes out.”

I pouted “Do you think I’m a pig! How can I possibly eat all that?” Qu Bing make an exaggerated expression of shock “Seeing your eating “performance” lately, what else do you think I can think about you. Of course you can eat it all. How can you not?” I wrinkled my nose and huffed, turning my face away to ignore him.

I bump into Jiu Ye’s dark eyes staring at me with hidden pain. I realize that my usual banter with Qu Bing shows him our intimacy and affection. Unconscious and effortless comfort such as this scene is like a sharp sword that can cut into the heart, and even a flash of this sword’s brilliance is enough to hurt him.

A covered dish is brought out and the waiter explains the dish as made with donkey meat to represent the mythical dragon meat, and is a perfect Winter dish. He took off the cover and instead of smelling alluring, it

immediately turns my stomach. I rush over to the window and heave. The waiter hurried to give me a handkerchief and some tea, while Huo Qu Bing rubbed my back and looked worried "Where do you feel ill?"

I sip some tea and it makes me feel better "I don't know, I just suddenly felt like retching." Jiu Ye sits to the side and has a look of hidden despair in his eyes. He tells the waiter "Take away all the heavy dishes and bring some fresh tea, adding some dried orange peel in it."

Huo Qu Bing helped me back to the table "Are you feeling better? Do you want to go back and see a doctor?" Jiu Ye stared at me and suddenly said "I'll listen to your heartbeat." I looked at Qu Bing who just smiled "I forgot there was a talented doctor sitting right here."

Jiu Ye put his fingers on my wrist, but his fingertip is colder than ice. He was trying hard to control it, but I can feel the tips of his fingers shaking. He takes a long time to listen to my heartbeat, leaving Huo Qu Bing anxious and asking worriedly "What is it?"

Jiu Yu withdrew his hand and with a smile, a very pained smile, said "Congratulations are in order to General Huo. You're going to be a father." Huo Qu Bing sat there stunned for moments, and then he grabbed Jiu Ye's arm and was in such joyful disbelief "What did you say?" Jiu Ye turned his head and looked out the window. His lips quivered and he was about to answer Huo Qu Bing but his voice was stuck in his throat and he couldn't get the words out.

Tian Cao pushed Huo Qu Bing away and coldly said "Jiu Ye said General Huo, you are about to become a father." And then he turned and softly said to Jiu Ye "Jiu Ye, let's go home." Jiu Ye was still looking out the window and he lightly nodded his head. Normally he's so gracious and polite with proper etiquette, but today he's so shaken that he doesn't even say farewell or look back before leaving.

Huo Qu Bing just smiles at me with a dumb look of happiness and I also just sit there in a daze. Everything was so sudden, and even though I knew it was bound to happen....in another place, at another time, I would

have been so ecstatic that I would be speechless. But today.....I touch my wrist and it still feels cold there. Huo Qu Bing suddenly picked me up and strode to the door. I let out an “ah” and then ask “What are you doing?”

Everyone in Yi Ping Ju falls silent and stares at us. I’m so embarrassed that I bury my face in his chest and wished for hole to open up and swallow me. Huo Qu Bing could care less, or he simply ignores them all. He carries me into the carriage and calls out to the servant “Go to the Palace and summon the best physician.” I grab his arm “No! This is between us and I like it to be discreet. If the physician is summoned, everything will blow up. There are doctors aside from the Palace physicians.”

He stopped the servant and then turned to me “I’m just so happy that I forget to think things through, but.....” He smiled and grabbed my hand “I just want to shout to the world that I’m going to have a son.” His happiness is contagious and I lean on his shoulder and break into a smile. But then I sudden realize what he said and pinched him “What do you mean? If it’s a daughter you won’t be happy then?”

He quickly shook his head “Happy, I’m happy either way. If it’s a boy, I can teach him to ride, to hunt. I’m happy if it’s a girl, too. A little Yu Er, how could I possible not adore her? I want girls and boys. Let’s have a few more, and we can make our own football team. Father and sons on the field, I guarantee we’ll cream any other team so that they’ll lose even their pants in the match.”

I stare in shock “Do you think this is a sow dropping a litter?” He looked pleased “If you are willing.” I want to pinch him again, but this person is made of such thick skin. In and out of battles, he doesn’t blink at arrows or swords coming towards him. My little bit of strength is like tickling him. I decide to save my energy so I make a face and close my eyes. He gets nervous immediately “Yu Er, where are you not feeling well?”

I ignore him while resting on his shoulder, so that makes him even more nervous and he hollers outside “Back to the estate immediately!” and

then added "But make sure the carriage doesn't shake too much." The driver was silent and then politely asked "Does the General want me to go faster or slower. If it's faster then the carriage will surely shake."

I can't hide it any longer and burst out laughing. Huo Qu Bing realized what I did and lightly tapped me on the hand "Now you've resorted to these tricks to torment me." "What can I do? I can't beat you on brute strength alone, so all I can do is resort to weird tricks." I smirked "And now I even have a hostage inside me. Let's see if you'll dare be mean to me from now on."

.....

I don't know how other women are like when they are pregnant, but other than dislike for smelling very pungent scented foods, everything else is normal with me. In the early months I would get lazy, but now I'm back to normal. I sleep well, I eat well, and if it wasn't for Qu Bing's stern eagle eye always trained on me reminding me that I wasn't just taking care of myself, I probably could say that I was also playing well.

When I walk up to the swing I hear Qu Bing calling behind me "Yu Er." I can only turn around and walk away. Finally a day dawns with bright sunlight during this Winter season and I ask him if we can go riding outside the city. He immediately answers "Don't forget your state right now." My state? All I've got is an extra little person inside of me. What's such a big deal about that? And I'm even showing at all yet.

According to Hong Gu, a woman needs to turn a blind eye to her man, because if she spends her entire time keeping tabs on him, the end result won't be the man staying by her side forever. She'll just drive the man to find another place to go where he's not being kept track of. But what about if a man constantly keeps track of a woman? Hong Gu was silent for a long time after I asked her, and then she said a woman needs to be thrilled about that, because it means he doesn't want to even look at another woman. I was very upset to hear this. Not fair, so not fair!

At night I told Qu Bing the advice Hong Gu gave me, but I changed

the genders around “A man needs to learn to turn a blind eye to a woman and stop keeping track of her all the time. If he keeps staring at her, the end result is.....” I tried to indicate what he needed to do so he can re-assess the way he’s been behaving lately. He was reading a Xiong Nu map at his desk, and after he listened to what I said, he calmly replied “No one wants to die, and I will never give you the opportunity.”

I humph at him and look left and right, front and back, walked inside and outside the room, walked outside and inside the room, and there still remains nothing that I can do within his allowance parameters. He sighed and looked at me “Are you that bored?”

I pouted pitifully and nodded my head “All the maids have been lectured by Uncle Chen already and no one will play with me. In the past we could kick a shuttlecock, swing on the swings, play hide-and-seek, duck-duck-goose, tag, or you’ll take me out to hunt in the mountains. But now I can’t do anything. And I can’t even read a book, the midwife said reading during pregnancy harms the body. They also won’t let me embroider. So what am I to do?”

He looked concerned “It does sound like you can’t do anything. How did all the pregnant women survive this ordeal?” I explain “That midwife you hired says that a pregnant woman must only do one thing, which is to eat more and rest more to make the stomach bigger and then have a fat baby.” I hold my hands out in front of my stomach and mimic a large ball.

He laughed out loud and gestured me over. He sat me down on his lap “I didn’t know you were this bored. I’ll spend more time with you in the future. Yes.....” he thought for a moment “What about this! You’ve read a lot of military manuals, whereas I’ve read very few. Why don’t we play war on a sand board? We’ll each take a side and wage war against each other.”

My annoyance dissipated promptly and I clapped my hands “That’s not exciting enough. Let’s bet on it.” His chin was resting on my forehead and he murmured “Whatever you want. How much money do you have after you sold the businesses? You better not cry if you lost it all.”

I smile “Don’t think that just because the Xiong Nu think of you as an undefeatable warrior god that you will surely beat me. The Xiong Nu don’t know you like I do. Plus if we use the Xiong Nu territories as our battlefield, I’m more familiar with the area and the climate, you’ll be totally outclassed. And finally, think of the great generals who are good on paper but can’t actually fight on the battlefield.”

He turned serious and accepted that I had a good point. He put my hands in his hands and whispered in my ear “In this entire world, you are the only person I have never intended to guard against. In fact, I wanted you to walk into my heart. It sounds weird since I’ve grown up in and out of the Palace and I’m actually a very wary person. But I just knew you were someone that was worthy of me using my real heart in exchange for yours. And my instinct wasn’t wrong on this.”

My nose turned achy and I kissed his cheek and leaned on his shoulder for some time before smiling “I think you’re engaging in mind games with me already to gain an advantage. You want to weaken my defenses from the get to so that I will go easy on you.” He laughed “What about you? Aren’t you already plotting your move and setting the stage for failure. If you lose you can say you were just letting me win.”

Us two wily foxes smiled at each other with candor and excitement. I took out a handkerchief and wrote down the bet. Qu Bing took a look and happily doubled down next to my bet.

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The central Xiong Nu forces may have retreated to the desert North region, but they have not given up on attacking the Han border territories. At the end of Winter, the Xiong Nu forces attacked the Ding Xiang and Yo Bei regions and killed over a thousand Han citizens. Liu Che deliberated carefully and decided to send out a large armed force to eradicate the Xiong Nu for good.

Huo Qu Bing becomes even busier, but no matter how busy he is, he always tries to find time to keep me company. If it is matters that can be

handled at the estate, he will work at home. His subordinates become regular visitors to the estate.

I'm not yet showing, and other than a few trustworthy maids and a midwife, no one knows I'm expecting. It's nearing New Year again, and because Qu Bing knows he has other things to celebrate such as my pregnancy, he orders the estate to be especially decked out this year. Everyone's been greatly rewarded and the entire estate hums with a festive air. The servants are hustling to decorate the estate and their coming and goings lend a very busy mood all around.

My sand battles with Huo Qu Bing are also lots of fun. I said back then that I knew him quite well, but I forget that he also knew me quite well. I ended up not gaining any advantage on that, losing seven or eight matches to him out of ten. If we really were on the battlefield, coupled with his power, he'd likely win every round.

Later I thought about it and decided to stop thinking like myself, and put myself in Yi Zhi Xie's shoes. I study every move and consider how Yi Zhi Xie would respond. Plus my familiarity with the region and the climate, I use methods to winnow down Huo Qu Bing's forces, which ends up earning his praise.

The two of us use the sand board to travel thousands of miles and fight over the entire Xiong Nu territory. The Han drawn maps aren't always accurate, and after every battle I will tell Qu Bing where to correct it. He's a fast learner and always asking for clarification and confirmation. He keeps asking me over and over about the people and the climate until he's completely familiar.

To outsiders watching Huo Qu Bing's string of victories, they have no clue how hard he works behind the scenes. From Li Guang to Gong Xun Aou, they constantly get lost in the desert. For a Chang An born Han person to become familiar with the Xi Yu kingdoms and the Xiong Nu territory requires an incredible amount of hard work.

Huo Qu Bing accompanies me to watch the servants hang up the red

lanterns. I casually wonder “It appears you’ve lost the entire estate to me. Maybe we ought to change the “Huo” character to a “Jin” character?” He laughingly embraced me tightly and with his chin resting on my shoulder says “Sure! Why don’t we go ahead and change the name plate hanging over the front door as well. Change it to Jin Estate. But you’ve lost most of your money as well, so how can you feed an entire estate full of people?”

All the nearby servants are focused on their tasks with their heads down, each staring intently at one spot. It’s like all they are doing is working and they see nothing else. My thick skin has been well-trained by Qu Bing now, and especially in the estate, I’m used to him hugging and kissing me. Whatever this person wants to do, he will never hesitate because someone is around. I push his hand away and smile “From now on, people will easily recognize if someone is from the Huo Estate.”

He asked why and I turn towards him and cross my eyes “All of them are turning cross-eyed from staring at one spot to avoid looking at us, isn’t that a perfect way to identify them?” He looked around at the servants and then tweaked my nose and kissed me on the eyes “You’d better not turn cross-eyed.”

Chen An Kang and Zhao Puo Nu are laughing as they walk in and happen to see this scene. Chen An Kang knows about Qu Bing and I and his ability to maintain his demeanor is better than Zhao Puo Nu, trying to laugh in an awkward way, whereas Zhao Puo Nu just stares at his feet. I see his discomfort and even my little bit of awkwardness goes away. I mutter “Here comes another cross-eyed person.” and then bow to them before walking away with a laugh. I can hear Qu Bing trying to refrain from busting out laughing as he says to them “They are all waiting in the study, let’s go now.”

.....

It’s early Summer and already quite hot. The entire Han court is angling to confront the Xiong Nu, and all military warriors from young and old alike want to take part in what will be the largest and furthest deployment of armed forces in the history of the Han dynasty. This will be

for the glory of the entire Han Empire, and a way to leave their names in the annals of history.

Liu Che decides to deploy three hundred thousand troops to go deep into Xiong Nu territory to confront the Shan Yu and the Left Sage King's troops directly. He names as the lead Generals Wei Qing and Huo Qu Bing, who are each taking fifty thousand troops and splitting into two routes into Xiong Nu territory. To ensure success, Wei Qing takes his most trusted subordinates, and older group of generals who have battled with him many times. Huo Qu Bing also chooses his own team of younger leaders. Li Gan begged to follow his father and accompany Wei Qing into battle, but Liu Che did not approve so Li Gan will miss this deployment.

After Huo Qu Bing heard about this, he asked Liu Che to make Li Gan his Lieutenant General. If something were to happen to Qu Bing in battle, then Li Gan will take over his forces and finish the battle. Huo Qu Bing's request was completely unexpected not only to Li Gan's side, it was completely unexpected to me as well.

"Qu Bing, aren't you afraid Li Gan won't listen to your orders, or he'll have any tricks up his sleeve?" The battlefield is already dangerous, and with Li Gan by his side, I worry even more. "Li Gan is battlefield material, it's a waste not to use him! Our hidden skirmishes in Chang An are one thing, but once he's on the battlefield facing the Xiong Nu, it's another thing. Li Gan is a real warrior and this concerns the safety of a nation. He knows what's important. Yu Er, don't worry. When have I ever read someone wrong?"

Huo Qu Bing was so confident that after I thought about it, he did make sense. I looked at him and felt an even deeper sense of pride. He complimented Li Gan as a real warrior, but that would make him a warrior among warriors. He is confident and brave to use someone who might be his enemy in politics, and doesn't worry about Li Gan backstabbing him afterwards once they return to court. If his heart and honor wasn't even greater than Li Gan's, how could he understand Li Gan's point of view, and how could he be willing to endure Li Gan.

After the hustle of preparation, everything is ready and waiting for deployment. This battle has gathered together Wei Qing, Huo Qu Bing, Gong Xun Aou, Li Guang, Zhao Puo Nu, Lu Buo De and such other extraordinary generals. It could be said as the greatest gathering of military talent in Han history. And the most acclaimed Han scholar official Xi Ma Xiang Ru will be accompanying this deployment, using the might of his pen to record how the shiniest military might in the Han dynasty managed to twinkle in the Xiong Nu sky.

“You’re leaving tomorrow so hurry up and get some sleep!” I kept telling Huo Qu Bing. He was laying with his head on my belly “He moved again.” I smiled “He’s getting more and more mischievous. At night he constantly kicks me awake. Doesn’t he need to sleep?”

He murmured in a low voice “Good son, please don’t torment your mommy, otherwise your daddy I won’t be nice to you. After you come out, you can move around as much as you want.” I push him away and blow the light out “Sleep!” He embraced me and didn’t move for the longest time. I thought he had fallen asleep when he spoke “Yu Er, I’m sorry that I have to leave you all alone in Chang An. This deployment we are going far, and the quickest I can return is three or four months.”

I hold his hand “Don’t worry! Don’t you know my personality by now? How could anyone mistreat me? Plus there is Uncle Chen in the estate and the Empress in the Palace. You go fight your Xiong Nu without worrying about me! Yi Zhi Xie is not that easy to defeat.”

His hand stroked my belly “It’s almost four months now, but how come you’re still barely showing?” I laugh “What’s wrong with that? The doctor says I am barely showing, though soon it’ll pop out.” I stick my head in his chest and grumble “Oh noes! When you come back it’ll be when I’m at my most hideous. I will go hide and not see you until after I have the baby.”

He laughed out loud “I notice you don’t spend time on make up and hair and I thought you didn’t care about these things. Don’t worry, the hot sun in the dry desert, when I return I’ll be as black as an eel. If you don’t

find me unattractive, then I won't find you unattractive."

He sighed and kissed me "Thank god it's only four months and I have plenty of time to come back and see his birth. Otherwise I'll be so anxious it'll kill me." I say "Even if you're back you won't see his birth. Men aren't allowed in delivery because they think women would dirty their aura so they always wait outside."

He scoffed "When your beloved woman is giving birth to your child, what dirty aura could there be. There is only an entire house full of happiness. When I come back I will be sure to stay by your side during the entire experience."

My heart was warm with love but it also ached. How could I bear to see him go? How could I not want him to stay with me? How could I not worry about him? But love is not about tying the other person down. We were both once lone birds flying in the sky. Now that we are together, it's not to force each other to fly slower or fly lower, it's to become the legendary twin birds. We will guide each other to fly higher and accompany each other so that our dreams can come true. So I need to let him leave without any worries, let him know that I can take care of myself and our unborn child.

I waited until the tears in my eyes dried and then I quickly said "Do you think I'll let you get away with this? I hear child birth is extremely painful, and especially with this one being the first, I will make you watch it all. And if it hurts too much I'll bite you a few times, so you hurt along with me." He nodded "Yes. We hurt, then we hurt together. If we're happy, then we're happy together."

I know he's leaving tomorrow so I pretend to be sleepy and yawn. He quickly said "Let's go to sleep!" I closed my eyes and waited until I could hear his breathing turn calm and steady. I opened my eyes and stared for a long time as his face, the sharp defined angles of his profile. Qu Bing, you must return without a single scratch on you. You must.

Chapter 32: Poisoned

After sending Huo Qu Bing off in the morning, I move back to Hong Gu's residence. Without him around, I can't stand living at the Huo Estate. I'm a wife yet not a wife, I'm a guest yet not a guest. It's just awkward for me to live there.

With a large estate filled with many residents, there is too much gossiping and I am not in the mood to deal with people's finger pointing. Uncle Chen is very considerate of me and didn't say anything, just ordering some maids, the chef, and some guards to go with me to Hong Gu's place. When I walk in with everyone trailing me, she laughs in surprise.

I walk around the courtyard once and then stretch my back "It really is more comfortable in my own home." Hong Gu softly sighed "What about the Huo Estate?" I smiled "If Qu Bing is there, then that is home. If he's not, then it's not home."

Hong Gu moved some fallen branches in front of me "I don't know whether it's a good thing or a bad thing that you met General Huo." I make a huge smiling face and stick it in front of Hong Gu "See! Do you see this? What is this? I don't want to hear you saying that ever."

Hong Gu quickly laughed "I see it, I see it." She looked at my stomach "I wonder who that child will resemble? Regardless it's bound to be a demon like you two. It will inherit both of your talents at tormenting people. I wonder if it'll go easy on anyone in the future."

When I was in the Huo Estate, the maids couldn't read, but with Hong Gu keeping me company it's much more entertaining. We read, play the zither, play chess, or talk about the gossip in Chang An. My days pass in calm comfort. When conversation strays to the past, I don't have any nostalgia, but Hong Gu does.

She mentions Fang Ru "I thought she wasn't such a cold person, but

now when she sees me all she does is avoid me. Sometimes she sees me walking directly towards her and she pretends she doesn't see me." I laugh "Marry a chicken, follow a chicken, marry a dog, follow a dog. Li Yan Nian was already holding a grudge towards me years ago, which was fine when I was still close with Li Yan. Now that we're now longer on good terms, Fang Gu can't disobey her husband's side of the family."

Hong Gu swiftly covered my mouth "Oh my lord! You watch your mouth, how can you still refer to her by her name." I coldly huff "Whether or not I call her Li Yan has no bearing on the way she will behave towards me."

Because I felt sorry for her, I tried to back off. But she keeps pressuring me and our friendship of the past has gradually disappeared. There is still the oath she made me swear. Even though I hold her life in my hands, but I can't do anything about it. Her life isn't important enough to outweigh the potential risk towards Qu Bing and Jiu Ye.

Even though I will keep my promise, but she can never feel at ease about me. In the beginning she just wanted to force me to leave Qu Bing and leave Chang An. But now she likely doesn't even care about my life and death anymore, and the sooner she can get rid of me for good, the sooner she can rest easy. Qu Bing isn't in Chang An right now and I'm pregnant, so my best approach is to avoid her during this time.

But life is just that way. The more you try to avoid something, the more it comes towards you. I want to avoid Li Yan, and she promptly comes to find me. Li Yan sent an invitation order for me to attend her birthday bash in the Palace. No matter how much the Emperor adores her, she's still just a concubine and can't have a banquet where the entire court will fete her. So she's having a small party with just the ladies attending. But it's exactly this type of small gathering that worries me more.

Hong Gu said "This is not a good banquet, how about we ask the Empress to help decline it." I shake my head and give a sad smile while Uncle Chen sighs "Even though it's not clear whether the Empress knows Ms. Yu is pregnant, but the Empress has always taken care of Ms. Yu.

Right now the General isn't in Chang An and surely the Empress will not be at ease knowing Ms. Yu is going to the Palace by herself. If she could have declined it she would have. It's clear the Emperor agreed to this so the Empress cannot say anything about it."

I looked at my figure "I'm showing now and I can't hide it anymore. Chances are Li Yan probably heard something so wants to check me out. The doctor said the first trimester is the most risky for a miscarriage, but now it's way past that. At least I got a few months peace and that's good enough for me."

Uncle Chen got on his knees and bowed to me "Ms. Yu, please listen to this old servant and take good care of yourself. No matter what happens, you must endure it for the sake of the child. No matter what insults befall you, you must wait until the General returns."

I don't know if I should laugh or cry "I'm the child's mother, I'm even more nervous than you. I don't need you to remind me. Has my behavior been that rash and impetuous?" Uncle Chen said nothing and I sighed. Just because I did not try to convince Qu Bing to marry a princess, everyone know thinks I'm someone who doesn't see the big picture.

Hong Gu grabbed my hand and smiled to Uncle Chen "Yu Er can sometimes be obstinate and extreme in her ways, but she's not someone who doesn't know what is important." I give Hong Gu an exasperated look. Was she trying to compliment me? If so, she likely made me even more flighty in the eyes of Uncle Chen.

It's the middle of Summer and the trip to the Palace was unbearably hot. Before I even arrive at the party location, a cool breeze blows over and I can hear the sound of rushing water, which immediately invigorates me.

Li Yan knows how to enjoy life. She's ordered a water wheel brought in, and mixed with ice, the water is carried to a high point and pours over a tarp constructed over a bamboo pavilion. It feels like it's raining and the banquet is situated right in the middle of a blanket of rain. The ice rain chases away the humidity of the Summer and adds a layer of fun to the

proceedings. Some ladies are sitting there admiring the flowers, some are playing with the water, and others are eating fruit placed under the rain curtains to keep cool. It really is a comfortable and relaxing event.

The unmarried maidens see my figure and then notice that I have the same hairstyle as them, indicating I am unmarried. They grow curious and keep checking me out. Some of the married ladies look shocked and hurry their daughters away and order them not to look towards me, as if they would also become an unwed mother if they just took one look at me.

Some of the ladies with more grace, or are afraid to be rude to me because of their husbands, give me a small smile or a quick greeting before avoiding me. It's like I have the plague and wherever I go, people immediately disperse.

I scoop some grapes up from under the water to eat. Li Yan ought to be pleased to witness what just happened. But I'm really sorry to her, because if she could see how much I could care less about being snubbed, she'd probably be disappointed again. I grew up in the desert without a lot of modesty, so these kinds of snubs can't hurt me.

In the middle of happily eating, I notice a familiar figure standing alone in the corner. Li Yan must hate this woman who betrayed her, so why was she invited? What was Li Yan planning? I eat my grapes and walk towards her. When she sees me, she looks slightly shy and I hand her some grapes "You look very beautiful wearing the Han style attire."

She bowed towards me "I've heard so much about you from Ri Chan and have been wanting to see you again. But it's not convenient for us to visit. We heard General Huo takes very good care of you, and even the average servant in the Huo Estate doesn't get to meet you. I didn't know it was because you were expecting. When Ri Chan finds out, he'll be so happy."

I smile at her, feeling a twinge of happiness "You call him Ri Chan, he allows you to call him that? Then I ought to call you sister-in-law now." Her cheeks were red but she was proud "You can just call me Wei Ji."

“Fine, you can call me Yu Er, or Xiao Yu.”

I noticed the jade ring on her finger and my heart shook. I grabbed her hand and stared at it. She asked me “As I was leaving today, Ri Chan took it off his hand and put it on mine. I didn’t know why, but now……” this normally aloof girl suddenly grew misty-eyed.

This ring was left for Ri Chan from his grandfather and it’s never left his hand since he was a child. He purposely made Wei Ji wear it to this party. He’s telling me that he’s leaving this lonely girl in a foreign place in my hands. I let go of her hand “He was worried about you.”

I rubbed my lower back and Wei Ji quickly asked “Do you want to sit?” There was nowhere to sit since all the good spots were already taken and the few remaining ones are in random spots but doesn’t seat two. Wei Ji pointed to a good spot “Let’s go over there, I don’t want to sit, let’s just talk.”

I made a face at her and dragged her to the best spot in the pavilion where some ladies were chatting. They immediately turned quiet and looked at me. When I walked right up to them, they suddenly stood up and gave me a dirty look before walking away.

I smiled at Wei Ji and gave her a victory gesture. I fixed my skirts and blithely sat down. Wei Ji sat down next to me and tried to cover her smile. Those ladies finally figured out what I did and gave me a hateful look. They can’t be too obvious so they purpose talk in a low but loud enough voice “I heard she used to run the dancing houses in Chang An! She plies in the male trade, so of course her behavior is without shame.”

I turn towards the Madam Jiang and smile “This Madam hasn’t heard it all! Don’t you know that Consort Li came out of my very own dancing house?” Her face turned ashen white. The dancing houses of Chang An, in the history of this city, the most successful male trade ever conducted was producing a country toppling beauty that is Consort Li. This Madam Jiang wanted to insult me and forgot about this.

My eyes brushed coldly over everyone of them and they had no choice but to lower their heads. Wei Ji whispered "They are afraid of you?" I shook my head "They are all afraid of Qu Bing. And maybe.....Consort Li. You must've heard about Qu Bing's temper. These ladies might be the wives of the scholarly officials, and their husbands don't report to Qu Bing, but right now the Emperor favors the military officials over the scholars. They wouldn't dare use their husband's lives or livelihood as a gamble to get even with me. And I....." I coldly huffed "Today this will surely be a Hong Men Banquet (referring to the famous Xiang Yu/Liu Bang banquet in the Chu-Han Contention). Even if I concede defeat I might not get out alive. Then I should stop laying down and scare these little villains away first."

As we're talking, Li Yan and the Empress arrive hand-in-hand. Followed behind him is Liu Che's newest concubine Yi Jie Shu. Li Yan and the Empress immediately looked at my stomach and then pretended they saw nothing. They both averted their eyes to receive greetings. It was instead Yi Jie Shu who smiled at me and softly said "Congratulations."

Li Yan was very solicitous and yielded to the Empress on everything, whether it was the dance performed or the games played. Empress Wei laughed and demurred "You are the birthday girl today, you decide everything and I am just a guest." After Li Yan, Yi Jie Shu, and a few of the other concubines conferred, they decided to pick flower sticks as the game. Li Yan's maid held all the sticks and all the guest were very into the game to make Li Yan happy. The party became very lively.

Right when everyone was having fun, the Emperor's delivery arrived. On top of a wooden plank was an intricate nine-leveled jade tower carved with a phoenix design. It was already rare to see such a large piece of jade, and paired with the detailed carving, it truly is one of the priceless wonders of the world.

Liu Che must have went out of his way to come up with this extravagant gift and everyone is just stunned by it. Eyes turn towards Li Yan with awe and she just smiled and had the tower placed in the middle of the party so everyone could admire it.

Liu Bo, who was still unsteady on his feet, wobbled up to his mother to present her with a birthday peach. He looked like a little adult person, saying a very proper birthday greeting to his mom while bowing his head. It was all great until he forgot his lines in the middle of his speech and ended up sucking on his thumb and looking towards the Crown Prince Liu Ju for help. Liu Ju lowered his head and reminded his younger brother, who got even more nervous with all the eyes trained on him, and ended up diving into his older brother's arms to hide his head so none of us could see him.

What a pair of adorable siblings, and I couldn't help myself but laugh. Empress Wei shook her head while Li Yan smiled but her eyes were cold. Her maid immediately took Liu Bo away from Liu Ju. I silently sighed. In the Imperial household, there is no such thing as regular brothers. Even if they are innocent now, their mothers will not allow it.

The flower stick arrived in the hands of Madam Jiang who had that run in with us earlier. She plucked a stick and it was read aloud "The holder of the stick can ask anyone at this party to do anything" and then she quickly put the stick back in the can.

Empress Wei looked at Madam Jiang, who acted like she was deep in thought and then turned to look at Wei Ji "I have not been able to forget the dance performance you put on for us, can Madam perform it for us again today?" Even though Wei Ji is of low birth and is not a Han person, but she is still the wife of Sir Guang Lu. There are many dancers here but Madam Jiang specifically asked for Wei Ji in order to insult the scene that day when we fought over Huo Qu Bing, and also to insult Wei Ji even more.

I stare at the person holding the flower sticks and she looked back at me before averting her eyes with some fear. It's clear they still somewhat fear me, but to Wei Ji..... Wei Ji's face was bright red but she slowly regained her composure. She grabbed my hand once and then stood up to dance.

Li Yan smiled at me and then picked up her wine to drink. Empress Wei heard that Madam Jiang wanted Wei Ji to perform and she didn't show any emotion. She just turned her head to converse with Liu Ju. I suddenly

remembered this saying, the person who knows you the best is your enemy,

Wei Ji's dance is beautiful and moving, but no one is watching her, purposely ignoring her or ridiculing her. Only Liu Bo was very into it, clapping and struggling out of his nanny's arms so he could stand closer to watch. Wei Ji was turning in her dance when I saw three round jewels roll in front of her from an unknown place. Before I can call out "be careful", she had stepped on the jewels and her body fell backwards. To stop her fall, she reached out and happened to grab the red cloth on the table holding the jade tower. The moment her body hit the floor, the entire jade tower tumbled on the ground and broke into pieces.

Liu Bo saw Wei Ji fall and moved forward to help her. Thank heavens a nearby woman pulled him back quickly, but even then a piece of broken jade glanced over him and drew blood. The nanny started screaming for the royal physician.

It was already a great crime to have broken the jade tower, but to harm a Prince is an even graver crime. Li Yan had her head lowered and relaxed after she saw he was just cut in two small areas. She looked upset still and had tears in her eyes as she berated the nanny and the maids.

I finally released my pent up breath knowing that it was not a serious injury. Thank god, thank god.....but even then.....my heart was nervous. I looked at Wei Ji, and in the commotion, she remained kneeling there in complete calm. Her face was white but she was very composed. She took off her ring and quickly shoved it to me "Wei Ji does not have this good fortune. Please tell Ri Chan that even though I am all alone in a foreign land, meeting him was a true blessing in my life. He need not miss me."

Li Yan looked at Wei Ji as she held Liu Bo. She looked down at the broken shards on the ground and said to Empress Wei "Everything will be decided as the Empress sees fit." Wei Ji betrayed Li Yan so Li Yan must want her dead. What happened today is clearly made out to be Wei Ji's fault, and the Empress will clearly not overturn the boat with Li Yan over the life of a Xi Yu dancer.

Empress Wei did not look at Wei Ji and said calmly “Everything will be dealt with according to the Palace rules. A Prince was injured, so she will be beaten 100 times with a stick. But since the Emperor’s present was also destroyed, he will decide what to do next.” Li Yan nodded.

100 strokes with a stick! Just this is enough to kill Wei Ji, what else can come after. Li Yan was cooing over Liu Bo but she gave me a taunting look. Auntie Yun was shaking her head at me from behind Empress Wei. When the Empress looked at me, her eyes conveyed warning and a plead as she looked at my stomach.

My hand was gripping Ri Chan’s ring so tightly it hurt. For this baby I must endure this, must endure this.....When Ri Chan gave Wei Ji the ring, he did not know I was pregnant. I need to protect this little person as well. I know he will understand and forgive me. And who could have imagined that Li Yan’s trap could have gone off without a hitch, and even better, a Prince was even accidentally hurt. Even though it was a minor injury, it is a grievous offense.

Wei Ji was dragged out by the guards and she closed her eyes, completely at peace.

I kept telling myself all sorts of reasons not to act, but I kept asking myself. If I let Wei Ji die today, can I go on living at ease? This would make me no different than the underhanded and vicious Li Yan. Years ago I hated the fact that Yi Zhi Xie betrayed his friends, and would this be a type of betrayal by me?

I called out “Wait!” Empress Wei gave me a resigned look and pretended she didn’t hear me. Li Yan smiled and nodded at me: Jin Yu, you didn’t disappoint me, welcome to the trap.

I kneel before the Empress and Li Yan “Wei Ji may be at fault, but she was not the cause of what happened.” I open my hands and a round jewel was resting there. In the confusion I could only grab one jewel, but I know this evidence is flimsy. This jewel is so flimsy that it’s just dragging me down and no one can save me. “When Wei Ji was dancing, I saw a few of

these jewels roll under her feet, which caused her to trip.”

Li Yan stared at the jewels and said nothing. Her maid said “The prince and princesses were playing with these jewels for fun, so are you saying.....” She shut her mouth “Your servant I deserve to die.”

Li Yan slapped her across the face and screamed “You worthless servant, how dare you speak such nonsense!” Li Yan looked around “Other than Jin Yu, did anyone else see the jewels roll under Wei Ji’s feet.” Everyone vigorously shook their head,

Li Yan looked at the Empress. Now this won’t get resolved as easily as killing Wei Ji. One jewel injured a prince and the rumors have now pointed fingers at the other princes and princesses here. Who could be so hateful as to want to destroy the present their royal father gave to Consort Li? And in turn injured their young brother? Empress Wei had a cold smile “We shall investigate fully. Take Wei Ji and lock her up for now.” Li Yan stared at Empress Wei who continued “And take Jin Yu as well.”

With a definitive slam, the door to the prison cell was secured shut. Wei Ji was crying “Xiao Yu, why did you get yourself involved?” I took her hand and placed the ring back on her finger “Since Ri Chan put this ring on himself, you’ll have to give it back to him yourself.”

Wei Ji was calm in the face of death, but now she’s sobbing wildly. I wipe away her tears and look around the prison “It’s better than I had imagined.” Wei Ji stood up and took the hay on the floor and made a thick mat for me to sit on “There is no sun in a prison cell and the floor is too damp.”

I touch my belly and silently think – I’m sorry, your daddy left not long ago and I’ve taken care of you all the way to the inside of a prison cell. I always considered Li Yan an enemy of the Wei family and never thought of her as my enemy. But from this day forward, she and I no longer have a shred of feeling for each other. She constructed one trap within a trap, but who is her ultimate target? Is Li Yan hoping to use this to harm Liu Ju and Empress Wei? If so this is pretty weak. So what is she looking

to do? I can't figure it out right now.

After two days there has been no movement. I'm sure Uncle Chen and Hong Gu have completely lost their bearing and must've tried to visit me already. But they haven't appeared, which means things must be dire.

Our food is already better than what other prisoners get, but compared to the food at the Huo Estate, it's comparable to slop. I'm not a picky eater and I can eat anything, but this unborn baby has been spoiled by us and since I got pregnant there are foods I can no longer stomach.

Wei Ji gives me the best portions of her food and I do not resist. But even then, I still have no appetite so I force myself to eat more, but then I throw it right back up. Wei Ji nervously looks at me with tears in her eyes. I'm full of worry and hopelessness, but I don't want Wei Ji to feel bad so I laugh "I don't know who he resembles, neither Qu Bing nor I are picky eaters. Yet we've raised a picky child. Later I'll have to teach him a lesson."

The entire prison has only one area that, during noon time, a sliver of sunshine would come in. In the beam of light, a million flecks of dust dance and make a person feel dazed. Am I the dust, or the dust me, or the entire world is just a fleck of dust?

A pair of thin boots, a form-fitting white robe, with the sunlight behind him, it illuminates him in a halo of golden light. He looks like an illusion that will blow away with the wind. But that smile as warm as the sun feels so completely real it hits me right in the heart. In the dank and cold prison cell, his appearance turned everything warm and bright. I can't believe it so I close my eyes, but when I open he's still standing in the sunlight.

Jiu Ye looked at me, his eyes full of worry and fear. He reached his hand to me and without a word I knew he wanted to take my pulse. He needs to immediately make sure I'm fine before he can relax. I wordlessly give him my wrist and his expression turns misty. I want to take my wrist back but he grabs it, grabs it so hard my wrist actually hurts.

He's still smiling but in the corner of his eyes I see shades of exhaustion. It looks like it was harder on him than me, the person in this prison cell. I feel all these indescribable feelings and after a moment I say "I didn't endure any hardship." He slowly released my hand "Madam Chen wouldn't let anyone inform General Huo. Do you want me to notify him?"

I shake my head "He can't be distracted on the battlefield. This battle is against the Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu, and it's his dream since childhood. If he doesn't give it his all during this battle, it will become one of his life's greatest regrets. Plus I was in the prison for just a few days, no big deal. Oh right, why are you here?"

He smiled wanly "The Emperor can be considered my uncle, so this favor wasn't too hard." He was very casual about it, but the difficulties inherent is clear. I don't know what sacrifice he made, what promises he gave Liu Che. With his personality, he'll carry the entire burden all by himself. No matter how I ask he will never tell me. It's best if I act like I believe him, at least that will not let his efforts go to waste.

"Yu Er, what happened. Tell me so I can decide how best to handle it." I quietly think and then tell him everything, from my relationship with the Xiong Nu, my friendship with Ri Chan, and the fact that Li Yan must've guessed that Ri Chan and I are not casual acquaintances. She used Wei Ji to seamlessly entrap me into her web.

Jiu Ye listened to what I said and his eyebrows furrowed "There is something else you're not telling me. Everyone in court knows that General Huo and General Wei, even though they are relatives, their relationship is precarious. With the Emperor's favor, subordinates of General Huo often band together to belittle subordinates of General Wei. If Consort Li wanted the Crown Prince position and to oppose the Wei family, she shouldn't be upsetting General Huo. She ought to be using the two generals' shaky relationship and try to win General Huo to her side. Why would she keep targeting you? And this time even the princes and princesses are involved. That means she wants you....." Jiu Ye did want not to say those words of ill-tidings in the same sentence as me, so he let his words trail off.

I smiled at him “I really can’t keep anything from you.” I tried to sound casual to try to lighten the mood, but it didn’t work and Jiu Ye just stared at me “I do have some personal conflicts with Li Yan, but I can’t reveal it. The fact that she hates me this much is also a surprise to me.” Jiu Ye nodded and didn’t press further. He thought and asked “The critical factor is who released the jewels. Or to find someone who dropped some jewels. Madam Jiang may have started it all, but she’s just a clueless person. Chances are she knows nothing, so we need to find that palace maid to ask.”

“That’s also what I was thinking. She put that flower stick back in the jar so quickly I was already suspicious that she made up the rule. But since Li Yan tasked her with doing this, that means Li Yan trusts her implicitly. And if she’s under Li Yan’s protection, it will be hard to question her and find out anything of value.”

Jiu Ye smiled, different than before, it was cold “Why ask her, all we need is for Li Yan to decide to sacrifice her.” I thought about it, understanding what he means, but unsure of how Jiu Ye can make Li Yan agree to back off. There was a sound of metal banging outside and Jiu Ye looked torn and loathe to leave “I have to go. Please endure for two or three more days.”

Since Jiu Ye walked in, Wei Ji hid in the corner but she kept sneaking glances at him. When she heard he was leaving, she suddenly rushed up and bowed three times to him. Jiu Ye looked at her with shock and he had no time other than to bow back “I will bother the Madam to please take care of Yu Er.” Wei Ji avoided Jiu Ye’s bow and quickly nodded her head.

Jiu Ye’s departure took away the only sunlight in the prison, but he had already left the sunlight on my heart. Wei Ji still looked dazed so I asked her “Do you know Jiu Ye?”

She nodded her head, and then shook her head “I’ve seen him. So you Han people call him Jiu Ye? Not a lot of people have seen him before, but we all envision that he’s someone with a heart as wide as the sky. We Xi Yu people call him “Shi Nan Tian” Xi Yu is drier than the central plains

and not a lot of medicinal plants can grow there. Han people always love to sell it at exorbitant prices to us. But Shi Nan Tian opened medicinal plant shops all over Xi Yu, and the prices are the same as in the Han dynasty. When there is an pandemic outbreak because of the war, his shops always give free medicine to homeless people. Before I was selected as a dancer, I saw him once treating a little beggar on the street. That day he wore all white, as spotless as the snow on the highest mountain peak. But that little beggar was covered in smelly boils yet he still held him in his lap. His every gesture was gentle and careful, as if he was afraid that child would hurt, as if he was holding the most precious gem in his arms. Later in the Palace of the Gui Su kingdom, I saw him again. The prince had just tested a new bow and was so excited, wanting to embrace him. It was a priceless gesture people only dream about, but he made no move. Even though he smiled, I can feel his heart was cold and did not want it. I overheard them talking, and thought to myself that he must be the legendary “Shi Nan Tian”, for who else in this world has a heart like his. Even though he is handicapped, but his voice and his form makes you believe that he is more lofty than anyone in this world. Every time I see him, he is smiling, but I feel like he’s carrying an enormous burden. So my biggest respect is not to disturb him. He stayed in the palace for three days and I just observed him from a distance for three days. Everyday I prayed to the Heavens, asking that one day he can live an ordinary life. I cannot imagine that I would see him again today, and in such an unexpected place.”

Wei Ji smiled but it was one full of sadness. “Seeing “Shi Nan Tian” today was wonderful. He has anger, has rage, has true happiness. He doesn’t seem as lonely.....but he....he appears to be so sad.”

I silently turned my head away and stared at a random spot. I don’t know what I’m looking at, I just want to avoid Wei Ji’s questioning look. Shi Nan Tian (the sky which eases suffering), he’s easing other people’s suffering, but who will ease his suffering?

Since Jiu Ye arrived, our accommodations have improved. The food tastes better and we even get a bottle of milk after dinner. Because I’m so picky and the things I can’t eat make me throw up, Wei Ji always let me eat whatever I can keep down, so the two of us switch up our meals that way and I’m full enough. In the darkness Wei Ji softly says “Tomorrow we will

be able to leave.”

I murmur my concurrence. Wei Ji trusts Jiu Ye implicitly. She doesn't care about all the details, she just believes what Jiu Ye said to me about enduring for only two or three more days.

In the middle of the night, I break into a cold sweat and wake up from my sleep due to sharp pain. I want to call out for Wei Ji but I can't make a sound. My body is alternatively hot or cold and I can't exert any strength, only shivering. Thank god Wei Ji is a light sleeper and my shaking awakens her. She takes one look at me and is so frightened that she starts to cry. She screams out for someone to come.

I see her reaction and I know something is very wrong. Wei Ji is a very calm and level headed person, so for her to lose her composure like this, the way I look is probably half foot in the grave right now.

Wei Ji calls for some time but there is no response. She takes off her outer robe and covers me with it. My body hurts so much it feels like it's splintering into small pieces, and all I want to do is vaporize so I can avoid this torturous pain. My consciousness slowly drifts into darkness.

No, I can't fall asleep. If I sleep there might be no more pain, but someone will be devastated. I promised Qu Bing that I would take care of myself....and the baby. My mind snapped back into focus and I used my last bit of conscious thought to bite down hard on my tongue. The blood in my mouth awakens me a bit.

This pain came out of nowhere, it's not an illness, but more like poison. I can't talk and can only use my eyes to communicate with Wei Ji. She really is very smart and when she sees me eyeing the jar she brings it over. She props me up and feeds me the milk. The taste of the milk mixed with the blood in my mouth goes down my throat and it tastes disgusting but I force myself to drink it all. Every gulp might increase my chances of surviving.

Wei Ji holds me and keeps crying “Xiao Yu, if someone has to die it ought to be me. I was the one who betrayed Consort Li and then broke the jade tower. Why am I fine.....” She suddenly realizing something and her face was regret and fear “We switched our food so you have ingested poison meant for two people.”

My entire mouth was bloody and even if I bit my tongue again I cannot stay awake. With the sound of Wei Ji’s sobbing and pleading, I slowly drift into a darkened world.

Chapter 33: Deadly Plot

It felt like I was sleeping on clouds, light and airy, an indescribable feeling of comfort. I want to keep sleeping like this, but the tiny speck of alertness in my mind was telling me to wake up. I have to wake up no matter what. I felt like I had been split into two, one person laying in the clouds wanting to sleep, the other person watching the sleeping me and telling me to wake up. But the sleeping me wasn't reacting, only getting more tired, so tired that I could tumble from the sky at any moment and smash into pieces.

My consciousness was starting to splinter, but the me in the sky was still struggling and calling "Jin Yu, you must wake up, you have to wake up. You can do this, so use all your strength to open your eyes. Use your strength, use your strength and you can wake up. You can do it....."

I can do it, I must do it. Someone is waiting for me! My eyes were as heavy as lead but I still did the most difficult task of opening my eyes. Jiu Ye stared at me with unbridled joy, unshed tears shining in his eyes. He pulled me into his arms "Yu Er, I knew you would wake up."

Wei Ji smiled even as she was crying "Thank goodness Jiu Ye refused to wait until the morning to get you out. The moment he resolved the case, even in the middle of the night he asked the Emperor to release you. Otherwise even if I died one hundred times I wouldn't be able to pay back my debt."

Ri Chan silently watched me with a slight smile, but his eyes were also misty. Xiao Feng pointed at me "You women are such trouble, you only cause people to worry!" His voice appeared to catch in his throat and he turned and left the room. Looks like I really did take a turn to Hell and back, such that even with Jiu Ye's unparallel medical skills wasn't even able to guarantee that I would survive. My hands touched my stomach and I relaxed knowing he was safe.

Jiu Ye's eyes are bloodshot and he looked uncharacteristically worn

down. The normally elegant him was dressed in a wrinkled robe that looked like he hadn't changed it in some time. I wanted to say "thank you", but I know it's not necessary. Those two words are too insignificant, and what I really feel inside, I don't want him to know. So many things are best kept deep down in the deepest reaches of the heart, and saying it out loud will only impart more pain.

My parched throat asked "Is everything over?" Jiu Ye stared at me without blinking, appearing not to be listening to me. I was afraid to look at him and turned towards Ri Chan, who quickly answered "You've been unconscious for four days and nights, even the most earth shattering matter ought to have been resolved." Ri Chan calmly explained "The jewel was a serving girl's purposeful act at the banquet, she worked for the newly designated Yi Jie Shu, who wanted to use the opportunity to turn Empress Wei and Consort Li against each other so she could reap the benefits. Once this was all revealed, the serving girl killed herself, and Yi Jie Shu was stripped of her title and sent to the Cold Palace."

Li Yan may not have toppled Empress Wei, but she managed to get rid of another rival. Yi Jie Shu, that girl with the bright healthy smile, so different than Li Yan's helpless beauty. She just received the Emperor's favor and so soon she has been sacrificed under two warring powers and now sent to the Cold Palace.

My heart shook and I chastised myself for even having the time to think about someone else's problem. Wasn't I supposed to be smart? If it wasn't for Jiu Ye, I would be six feet under now. I can no longer underestimate Li Yan, and I can't be soft hearted towards her anymore. Otherwise I will only hurt myself and let my enemies smile and my loved ones weep. "Was I poisoned?"

Jiu Ye didn't answer me, and when I turned around I saw in shock that he had actually fallen asleep while half laying on the pallet. Wei Ji looked at me "For the last four days and nights, Jiu Ye has been keeping vigil next to you and never once closed his eyes despite our trying to get him to rest." I looked at Jiu Ye's exhausted face and my heart's hurt was hard to describe.

Xiao Feng was worried and I quickly said “Don’t move Jiu Ye, let him sleep here! Move me to the other pallet.” Wei Ji and Xiao Feng helped Jiu Ye take off his shoes and laid his head on a pillow. They placed a bowl of ice near his feet to ward off the heat. As Wei Ji turned to leave, Jiu Ye pulled her skirt while he was still asleep, calling out “Yu Er.....” Everyone in the room turned to look at me, and then quickly averted their eyes.

Wei Ji wanted to pull her skirt out but Jiu Ye refused to let go. His forehead was furrowed in distress and everyone seeing it felt despondent. Xiao Feng wanted to help but Wei Ji stopped him “Let Jiu Ye grab onto it! At least he’ll rest better in his dreams.” Ri Chan softly sighed and handed a pair of scissors to Wei Ji, who cut her skirt where he was grabbing it. Jiu Ye’s hand relaxed while holding the skirt and his face eased. I laid my head on the pillow while my heart just ached.

Ri Chan understood somewhat and sat next to me, patting me on the shoulder “Weren’t you asking about being poisoned?” I took a deep breath and gathered my thoughts. Things are what they are today and I cannot hope to resolve things amicably with Li Yan. And now I’ve dragged Jiu Ye back into the muck of Chang An, despite him having almost extricated himself. This is also the deepest cesspool in Chang An – the fight for imperial succession. I have to get myself together no matter who is involved.

Ri Chan saw me listening and continued “These past few days Jiu Ye was busy saving you so he didn’t pay attention to anything else. Others asked who poisoned you but Jiu Ye wouldn’t answer. I think it’s Consort Li, and by now the Emperor must know you were poisoned because all the rare and precious medicines from the Palace have been delivered non stop. Even though it wasn’t specified for what use, with everyone pretending nothing happened, but it’s clear the Emperor is worried. And....”

If something happened, it would be one corpse and two lives. The Emperor can seal all information but Jiu Ye would be able to let Huo Qu Bing know. With his temper, and having control of the military, of course the Emperor is worried. When I think about this, I sudden realize that Li Yan is not doing this as a personal vendetta. Her end game is still the entire Han Empire. Despite Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing not always getting along,

they are still relatives. If she succeeded this time, the Han court would descend into chaos. Even if Liu Che could control the fury, he would be exhausted by it and have no time or attention to pay to Xi Yu.

Wei Ji quickly came over to wipe my sweat “Talk about this later! First get better.” I replied “I got my life back and I’m more nervous about myself than anyone is. It’s no problem to talk about this, and it’s better to figure it out. If I know what’s going on, I can rest better. Otherwise I’ll be worried about where the next attempt will come and can’t rest soundly.”

Ri Chan said “The key is that Consort Li and your relationship has always been good, and most people still think you are as close as sisters. General Huo and the Wei family isn’t that aligned politically. Even if he has equal military power as General Wei, even if Consort Li wanted her son on the throne, she ought not go as far as eliminate you and use that to enrage General Huo. With Consort Li so beloved right now, unless there was ironclad proof, the Emperor will never believe it. He might even suspect that the Wei family was behind this in order to lessen the growing power of the Li family. So now the Emperor doesn’t want to get to the bottom of your poisoning.”

I sigh “If Li Yan dared to do it, she would have prepared a get away plan and people ready to take the fall for her. If we’re not careful, innocent people might be sacrificed. Since it’s over with, I don’t want to bother with it. How did Jiu Ye get Li Yan to back down on the smashing of the jade tower that injured the prince?” Ri Chan shook his head “All I know is Jiu Ye spoke with the Emperor once, but only they know what the content of the discussion was. Afterwards the Emperor ordered Jiu Ye to investigate this matter. Maybe Consort Li thought it was too hard to topple Empress Wei with this, plus now Jiu Ye with his unknown resources are involved. Rather than make this more complicated, why not sacrifice a pawn and use it to topple someone becoming more dangerous to her.”

I humph once “She didn’t give up. She’s got more up her sleeve, and each new tactic is more deadly and vicious than the last. She’s pretending to let this go, and even left it to Empress Wei to punish Yi Jie Shu. In the future if the Emperor ever remembered Yi Jie Shu fondly, he’ll place the blame on Empress Wei for having her cast out.” Ri Chan and Wei Ji both

looked shocked and afraid “From the beginning it was a trap within a trap, so thorough and calculated.” I said to Ri Chan “I’m sorry to you. You could have lived comfortably in the Han dynasty, but now I’ve embroiled you in this court intrigue.”

Ri Chan held Wei Ji’s hand and smiled “In this lifetime it’s hard enough to find true friends, and if we live an exciting life, then it was all worth it. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have met such amazing men like General Huo and Jiu Ye, such loyal friends like Tian Cao and Xiao Feng. If you asked me, I’m willing to do this again.”

Wei Ji also smiled “I’m also willing. Stories talk about willing to die for one promise and I never believed it until I met you and Ri Chan. Forget one promise, I’m willing to die for one ring.” Xiao Feng piped up “I’m not willing. Little ole me just wants to run my business. Your crappy mess, don’t bother me again with it.”

Wei Ji wrinkled her nose and cocked her head, asking in a playful voice “Who was the first person to drop everything and hold vigil here day and night. Who was the person hollering that he would go slay Consort Li to avenge his big sister Yu. Who was the one who started crying first the moment Xiao Yu woke up?”

Xiao Feng had already hopped outside “I was like that because of Jiu Ye, and because of my grandpa.” Everyone looking at him started to laugh, and I felt a sense of warmth. All the darkness caused my Li Yan’s plot vanished. With friends such as these, I have no regrets.

.....

Jiu Ye wanted me to stay at the Shi Estate, and even Tian Cao, Ri Chan, and Hong Gu all begged me to stay there. Initially Uncle Chen was not sure, but when Jiu Ye asked “Can you guarantee that everyone at the Huo Estate is trustworthy?” then Uncle Chen slowly sighed and bowed to Jiu Ye “It’s all this old servant’s fault. When the General returns, he will personally go to thank you for taking care of Ms. Yu.”

Jiu Ye's tightly gripped hand on his wheelchair relaxed and he smiled and bowed to Uncle Chen. Tian Cao angrily huffed "Xiao Yu lived her when she first arrived in Chang An. We are old friends, the General doesn't need to thank us." Uncle Chen achieved his purpose and pretended not to hear what Tian Cao said. He said a few words to me and then turned and left.

Ri Chan looked like he was laughing and crying, while Wei Ji looked angry. I can only shake my head. Whether it's Jiu Ye or Qu Bing, if a woman met either of those men and they loved her, it would be a lifetime's blessing. But when these two huge blessings are added together, somehow it's not one plus one equals two, doubling in happiness. It's so precarious that one misstep and all three of us will be crushed.

Returning once again to the Bamboo Residence, the bamboos are still green, the white pigeons are still flying, but everything else has completely changed. I hide all my regrets in my heart, and Jiu Ye also tried his best to keep all his feelings hidden. On the surface he has his usual winsome smile.

Sometimes I will accidentally turn my head or shift my eyes and it will meet his eyes. In the dark depths swirled waves of emotion, heartache and pain blended together, which he brushed aside with a smile. Jiu Ye rigidly controlled my diet, my daily routine, until by the end of the month I was fully recovered. I kept asking him what he discussed with Liu Che or what promised he made to Liu Che, but he always just smiled and refused to answer.

Since I was "ill", Liu Che sent royal physicians and medicines, and the Empress also sent someone to check on me. The most ironic thing was Li Yan sending someone to check on me, and even sending me letters on how to take care of my unborn baby. Her words were all care and worry for me. If Liu Che read this he would be so touched that Li Yan was such an emotional person, and that we were still close sisters! Every time Xiao Feng saw one of Li Yan's servants he would be furious and looked like he wanted to stab someone, and he only backed down when Jiu Ye shot him a look,

After her servant would leave, Xiao Feng would hop around me and rail at her, about how even businessmen aren't as devious as her. He gets angry that we are so politely and smiling towards Li Yan's people. Tian Cao tried to call Xiao Feng down to no avail, so he just let him vent. Once Jiu Ye heard it, he shot Xiao Feng a long look, which actually gave Xiao Feng goosebumps. Xiao Feng rubbed his goosebumps and calmed down. It was rare to see that crab accept defeat and I just smile and fan myself.

Jiu Ye lightly said to Xiao Feng "From now on you are in charge of anyone sent by Consort Li. If you mistreat them even one bit, you might as well leave Chang An and go be Jing Yen and Sheng Xing's guy from now on." Xiao Feng lowered his head and stood in one spot for two hours, not even listening to either Tian Cao or myself when we try to console him.

After one night, Xiao Feng's expression changed a bit, and Tian Cao said to Jiu Ye "We can rest assured now and hand everything in Chang An to him in the future. He's older than Xiao Dian and Xiao Lei, and to be the boss in Chang An he needs to learn to be fake and conciliatory when necessary." This is true, but Jiu Ye didn't seem happy, appearing worried that Xiao Feng will go too overboard with this as well. But Jiu Ye wasn't able to think of a good way to explain this to Xiao Feng.

Since I'm all better, I decide to pay a visit to the Palace to thank them for their consideration of me during my illness. Jiu Ye immediately said "No." I furrow my brows and use the same tone of voice with him that he used with Xiao Feng "One needs to learn to be fake and conciliatory when necessary." Jiu Ye was so frustrated his eyes were filled with laughter as he stared at me. It's rare Jiu Ye is pushed into submission. Tian Cao was drinking tea and spit it out, choking on the water. The formerly somber Xiao Feng peeked at me and then at Jiu Ye's weird expression and then burst out laughing.

Jiu Ye looked at Xiao Feng and said with a smile "Behavior can be fake, but your heart must be real. Many rich people in Chang An end up with nothing. They were not making money to use money, they got lost in the money. You must retain your true heart no matter what experiences you go through." Xiao Feng looked stunned for a moment before smiling "I understand now." Tian Cao finally knew why I pretended to be Jiu Ye to

goad him. He looked at me, he looked at Jiu Ye, and then he softly sighed.

“Jiu Ye, I know you are worried, but these things I have to face by myself. According to etiquette I need to enter the Palace to thank them for their supposed concern for me. Even if.....even if I am no longer alone, and I am tightly connected to them now.” Jiu Ye was silent while Tian Cao left the room quietly.

“Don’t eat or drink anything in the Palace, whether at Consort Li or the Empress’s residence. Leave as soon as you can. If anything happens go find the Emperor, right now he’s the most trustworthy person there. The Emperor promised me..... Because of me and General Huo, the Emperor will protect you.” I was filled with a lot of anxiety and questions but now is not the time to ask it, so I just agree.

When I enter the Palace I first head to thank the Emperor. Liu Che was in his study reading official documents. He didn’t summon me inside, just speaking to me through the door and then sending me along. Everything was normal, related to my recovery, but one question appeared out of the blue. He asked “How many more months until the baby is born?” I thought about it but couldn’t find out a reason he wanted to know. Maybe he wanted to check that Qu Bing would be able to come back in time for the birth.

I ought to visit the Empress first, but for my own safety, I head to visit Consort Li. That way if Consort Li wanted to try anything, she would be wary. Li Yan’s smile was as beautiful as a flower. She looked at my stomach “This child’s life is full of danger, from the beginning it’s already endured so much. Who knows if more will befall it.....”

I laughed out loud and stop her from saying the rest of her ill words “How could that be possible? Qu Bing and I have never done anything bad we need to be wary of. Since your highness believes in fate, you ought to worry about yourself. Worrying too much may shorten a life. Hearing your highness has been sick recently, perhaps you’ve been worrying too much.” Li Yan’s grip on her handkerchief was so tight her knuckles turned white.

“I came to thank your highness for your “care and affection”, but now I need to go thank the Empress as well. May I be excused?”

I turn to leave and her cold voice rings out “Do you really think the Empress is protecting you? If Empress Wei was so innocent she couldn’t possibly have dominated the Back Palace for so long, causing Empress Chen to die alone in the Cold Palace. Wei Shao Er is an idiot compared to her. Empress Wei and Wei Qing are the two smartest in that family. All the Wei relatives are against Huo Qu Bing marrying you, except for those two. They neither object nor do they support. Empress Wei doesn’t care about previous issues between you two, always taking good care of you. Jin Yu, you can’t possibly be smart your entire life and then stupid when it comes to this?”

She casually said, each word carefully “Did you honestly think your illness was caused by me?” My head started to turn but I kept my smile on my face and courtesied to Li Yan before walking out. She suddenly asked “Why? Jin Yu, why?” I was confused so I stopped “Why what?”

Her smile disappeared and all that remained was sadness and confusion “I should call you Yu Jin. Why did you not revenge the Shan Yu of the Xiong Nu. Don’t you have the same grudge for your father’s death that I carry?” “So you did discover my true identity. Sorry to disappoint you, it’s of not much value. Even if I were a Xiong Nu person, any vengeance I have ought to be against Yi Zhi Xie, and not helping him fight the Han dynasty.”

“Jin Yu, I just want to know why. Before I entered the Palace, you counseled me to give up my revenge plans and live my own life. I thought then that you didn’t understand my pain so you could say such easy things. But now I know that you do understand, you do know my vengeance” Li Yan’s voice was sorrowful.

Different than her usual seductive beauty, Li Yan was like a lost child right now, her eyes filled with a deep hopelessness. My heart softened for a moment and I sighed before sincerely answering her “Because I had a Papa who loved me a lot, and met the man my Papa was hoping could give me

happiness. I'm actually as straight as a string. If I decided on vengeance I would see it through to the bitter end. If my Papa didn't force me to promise him that I would live my own happy life, then I would have tried to revenge the Xiong Nu a long time ago. I would have never come to Chang An. I would not have met Jiu Ye, met Qu Bing, perhaps....." I shook my head with a bitter smile "Perhaps I would have run out of options and seduced Yi Zhi Xie or married him. But the only difference is that I would have waited until he lowered his guard to me before killing him. And you want to put your son on the throne to control the entire Han Empire."

Li Yan's eyes were full of tears "Your Papa wanted you to forget the past and walk your own path. My mom refused to let me forget the vengeance. The moment before she died she stared at me and made me promise that I would seek revenge for her before she closed her eyes and died."

I pick up my skirt to leave and Li Yan's voice still rang out behind me "Why? Why?.....It's not fair. The Heavens are not fair.....You and I ought to have the same fate in life, but why are you free to come and go as you please, with Jiu Ye and Huo Qu Bing wholeheartedly loving you, and friends who care about you. Jin Yu, why do you have more happiness than me? I hate you, I hate you....."

Before stepping out of the room, I turned back and Li Yan was sitting on the pallet dressed to the nines in silk and jewels. Her skirt was fanned around her making her seem tiny and helpless, and her eyes were filled with despair and her face was ashen. I see that the jade curtains in front of her bedroom are just like the bars of a prison. The sun shines outside, but cannot enter the darkness of the courtyard.

My heart shook, it was like seeing an alternate version of myself. I hurry out of the room. The more I walk forward in life, the more I understand Papa's wisdom and know how fortunate I am. At a juncture in my life, if I had chosen a different path, I would have lived a completely different life.

Li Yan, you actually have a lot. You have brothers who love you, Li

Gan who wants for you to happy, and a beautiful son. For your purpose you lost yourself. Even if you succeeded, would you be happy?

The residence of the Empress is always suffused with floral fragrance. The large courtyard has not a single person in it, while the purple flowers above are slowly dropping its petals as I walk. Under the awning, Empress Wei is reclining on a bamboo pallet watching the falling petals dancing in the wind. The sound of water dripping can be heard, a steady beat. I stand for some time before she notices me, and without getting up she gestures me over. I quietly bow and then sit down next to her pallet. "The flowers are beautiful."

Empress Wei smiled "I have too much time, and nothing to do, so I spent it all on taking care of the flowers." I silently sit there until Empress Wei asks "Are you all recovered?"

Since everyone wants to believe I was just sick, I stick with the story "I'm all recovered, thank you for your concern these past few days." I was getting up when Empress Wei grabbed my hand "There is just you and I here, so say it like it is and stop talking in circles. You're tired and I'm tired of that."

The courtyard is vast and despite the sun out it doesn't shine completely inside. Sitting there long, I feel a chill that doesn't feel good. The water continued to drip and I think of a poem about how lonely one is in the courtyard accompanied only by flowers.

".....you learned your lesson this time. In the future you must be more cautious, and endure it when you must." I was zoned out so only caught the tail end of what Empress Wei was saying "Sometimes there are things one cannot endure." Should I have watched my friend die before me? Should I have watched Qu Bing marry another woman?

Empress Wei looked at the ground covered with fallen petals "If you cannot endure it, then you **MUST** endure it. There is nothing in this life that cannot be endured." My chill rose again, reminding me that this Palace may be beautiful but it was making me feel only emotional dislike and

exhaustion. I wanted to leave so I got up and bowed to Empress Wei. She nodded "Take care of yourself, you can come find me for anything."

I walk out of the courtyard and stand under the sunlight again. I can't help it but take a deep breath. Sitting inside, I thought it was sunset already since the light was so dim, but it's actually still daylight out. This place was just like Li Yan's residence, the view was different but one thing was identical, the sun could not shine in.

I understand Empress Wei's thinking. But sometimes it's happier to pretend to be stupid. I've always only thought of myself as Qu Bing's girl, and don't have any relationship with the Wei family. If Qu Bing wanted to help the Wei family, I would support it. If he didn't want to, I also support it. To me, it all boils down to what Qu Bing likes and what he wants to do. To Empress Wei, Qu Bing is someone she must get to support her. So she is nice to me just to show Qu Bing. Wei Shao Er may be Qu Bing's mom but she doesn't understand him that well. Once he decided on something he won't change his mind.

Liu Che wants his relationship strengthened with Qu Bing, and maybe even take the place of the Wei family in his loyalties. He wants to marry a princess to Qu Bing for that purpose. But Empress Wei might not want that, and to her advantage Qu Bing also doesn't want that. So she's happy to support Qu Bing, which might even make Qu Bing lose favor with Liu Che and stop Liu Che from using Qu Bing to oppose Wei Qing.

I did understand already. With Empress Wei's position in the family, if she supported me, there was no way the rest of her siblings would still be opposing me. I tried not to think too much about it and pretend to be stupid. Since all I care about is Qu Bing, that didn't matter. But now I have the baby and everything I do must be careful and keep him safe.

Qu Bing might not get along with Wei Qing and appeared to be gradually eroding Wei Qing's power, but Qu Bing's reason for doing this is to gain Liu Che's trust in him. But when it comes down to the position of the Crown Prince, Qu Bing would undoubtedly support the Wei family. But Empress Wei doesn't trust Qu Bing in the same way she doesn't trust Liu

Che.

Living in a Palace without sunlight for too long, in the end there is no one that can be trusted except oneself.

If something did happen to me because of Li Yan, Empress Wei would just use that opportunity to her advantage. Qu Bing will never let Li Yan get away with it, and all Empress Wei needs to do is sit back and watch Qu Bing get rid of her biggest rival for her. Li Yan and Empress Wei both want the same thing, but their methods are different. Their calculations are different and their results are different, that is all.

In that Palace, the only person who wants that child born alive is the Emperor. No wonder Jiu Ye told me if something happened to go find the Emperor but never mentioned the Empress. He already knew everything. But he was concerned about my relationship with Qu Bing and didn't want me to be hurt.

I lay down in the carriage and sigh. Qu Bing is out there fighting a long and hard war, and I'm here in grave danger. But nothing will happen to me, because I will protect myself and the baby. Before the carriage has arrived at the Shi Estate I already see Jiu Ye's figure. He was waiting for me outside the gate and I quickly wave at him.

The first thing I saw when I get off is "I didn't drink or eat anything." He nodded and reached out to take my pulse. A moment later he truly relaxed "You've had a long day, have dinner and then get some rest!" My heart felt a twinge of emotion but I keep my expression casual and nod my head.

.....

"How long until the child is born? How long until the child is born?
....."

"Not fair, not fair, not fair....."

“I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.....”

“When you can’t endure it, then you MUST endure it....”

Liu Che’s face, Li Yan’s face, Empress Wei’s face, they all flew around me and they continued to split into multiples until their eyes filled with coldness, anger, and smiles surround me.I try to run away while clutching my stomach but there is nowhere for me to go and I see they are about to grab my stomach.

I wake up with a “ah” and sit up on the pallet. The moonlight is lovely outside and shines its silver beam on the pallet, confirming that it was just a nightmare. My body was still shaking and Jiu Ye quickly walked inside on his crutch “Yu Er?” I held my head “Nothing. I just had a nightmare.” He sat down next to me “No matter the nightmare, it will never come true.”

His voice was like the Spring wind blowing away all the chill on my heart so that I slowly calmed down “Could the Empress have poisoned me?”

Jiu Ye had a bitter smile “Whether the Empress personally ordered it, there is no way to know. The Wei family is the court’s biggest power faction. From Princess Pingyang to many officials, all are related to them. Either Li Yan or Empress Wei’s factions could have poisoned you, and then are ready to point the finger at the other side. If it was Empress Wei’s side, if they succeeded, they would force the Emperor to give a rightful response to Huo Qu Bing. With the Emperor’s personality, he most likely would sacrifice Li Yan in that case. A beauty is hard to come by, but a great general is even harder to find. Plus a woman in the heart of the Emperor cannot equal his empire. But if Liu Che sacrificed Consort Li, he would always resent Huo Qu Bing, so this is a great way to kill two birds with one arrow. If it was Consort Li who poisoned you, then she would point fingers at Empress Wei or someone else. Only you know what she really wants. Perhaps her motive was even more understandable to you, so you paid attention to her and missed Empress Wei.”

I had a sad smile “No wonder you insisted I stay at the Shi Estate. In

my nightmare they wanted my baby. Until now, there are only short messages from the battlefield. I trust Qu Bing will return victorious, and if he does yet again, he will have gained higher ranking and prestige than the Great General Wei. The Emperor might heavily favor Qu Bing, but once Qu Bing's power gets too large, Liu Che will start to grow wary of him."

Jiu Ye replied "On the surface General Huo appears arrogant and wild, but he really is very calculating. He must already be aware of this. The Emperor is also wise and ought to be able to control his suspicions until it is manageable. Plus General Huo will not allow for any opportunity for him to commit an punishable infraction."

"I know this and Qu Bing told me before. His tactless behavior in the army base and the soldiers not liking him is all because of these considerations. The results are good and the Emperor trusts him more than any other general. I'm not worried about that right now, I worry that the Emperor wants my baby. He wants to raise the baby in the Palace."

My heart started to ache and despite trying to control myself, I start to cry. There is no mother in this world that wants to be parted from her child. Even though its an honor for the Emperor to raise a child, garnering immense love and prestige, but in truth he's no more than a hostage in there.

Jiu Ye looked concerned and worried "Why do you think that?" I shook my head "I don't know, I just have that feeling. Even if the Emperor never thought about it, Li Yan will be sure to remind him to do so. Li Yan hates me so much that even if she gets nothing out of it, she'll do it just so I won't be happy."

"Oh right!" I suddenly shouted "Li Yan has discovered that I was raised in the Xiong Nu. That day when Ri Chan played the flute and accompanied me while I danced the Xiong Nu dance, the Emperor also saw that. Then the Emperor must also know my relationship with the Xiong Nu."

Jiu Ye's face immediately fell and his eyes were filled with pain. He

quickly turned his head and looked elsewhere. I realized then how he must feel to know about that event. I bit my lip, wanting to say something but not knowing what to say. When he smiled and turned back to face me, he was back to normal “Think on the bright side. You have a grudge against Yi Zhi Xie, so the Emperor shouldn’t be wary of you. But if you think on the down side, no matter what you are a Xiong Nu person. You really don’t want to help the Xiong Nu?”

I sigh “That’s all true. Qu Bing’s position is very unique and if I tried to use Qu Bing to do something or encouraged him to do something for me, these are all things the Emperor needs to guard against. With Li Yan’s clever fanning the flames, there is an ever greater possibility the Emperor will take the baby into the Palace.”

Jiu Ye was silent for a while and then said “Don’t worry for now. If you are not willing, no one can take your baby. We have three months time, we can think of a plan. Just get some rest now.” I want to say something but Jiu Ye shakes his head. He helped me lay down to rest “Even if you’re not tired you need to let the baby rest.”

He pulled the blanket over me and then took a fan to fan me lightly. I kept my eyes open and stared at the ceiling. He asked me nothing but knew my thoughts. “You won’t have anymore nightmares. I will stay here and keep the nightmares away. So hurry up and close your eyes to sleep.”

Even though he said it jokingly, his voice was sure and unwavering, so much so there was no room to doubt him. I look at his gentle eyes and my heart started to thump so I quickly shut my eyes, afraid to look any longer. With the rise and fall of the fan, a cool breeze wafts over me. I realized that I was so preoccupied with the welfare of the baby that I neglected to take into account his feelings.

My heart just ached with pain and my mind cried out a thousand “I’m sorries.”

“Yu Er, don’t think too much. There is nothing to be sorry for.....” His voice was low and I couldn’t hear the rest of what he was saying. My body

didn't move an inch, pretending to be asleep is my only choice.

Chapter 34: Dangerous Plot

The Northern desert battle has the Great General Wei commanding fifty thousand troops and departing from Ding Xiang, while Huo Qu Bing commands fifty thousand troops and departs from Dai Jun, along with fourteen thousand horses and one hundred thousand foot soldiers.

Huo Qu Bing disregards personal conflicts and greatly uses Li Gan as his second-in-command, and he also heavily uses the surrendered Xiong Nu elite talent from the previous battles. Under his command is a group of seasoned and brave warriors. This leader of the pack roams through the desert over thousands of miles and finally meets up with the Left Sage King of the Xiong Nu army.

Even though he is attacking deep within Xiong Nu territory, but Huo Qu Bing knows this area well. His riders are more fleet and courageous than the Xiong Nu riders, and he defeats the Left Sage King. He also captures important officials to the Shan Yu, kills some tribal leaders and officials, and captures the Left Sage King's banner and drum. The Xiong Nu forces are in disarray. Huo Qu Bing's forces quickly cross over the Hou Mountains and he captures more tribal leaders, generals, and ministers numbering a total of eighty-three. He manages to kill over seventy thousand Xiong Nu, completely destroying the Left Sage King's forces.

Wei Qing's forces travel over the desert and meet up with the forces of the Shan Yu himself. He faces them with a new formation and also burns their supplies which greatly weakens the Shan Yu's forces. During the confusion the Han army manages to kill over twenty thousand Xiong Nu soldiers.

Under Liu Che's orders, because of what happened in the past and Liu Che is superstitious that Li Guang has bad luck at war, plus wanting to give Gong Xun Aou a chance to succeed, Wei Qing refuses Li Guang's plea to take the first attack and instead gives it to Gong Xun Aou and places Li Guang on backup. Li Guang once again gets lost in the desert and does not have a chance to face the Xiong Nu, and loses another chance to be made a

duke. This white-haired general, under extreme rage and despair, commits suicide in front of Wei Qing.

Despite the suicide of Li Guang casting a cloud over the Han army, this remains the most significant victory of the Han army over the Xiong Nu in history of the dynasty. So when Wei Qing defeats the Right Sage King the following year, after five years of war with the Xiong Nu, the Xiong Nu have been completely defeated. Henceforth the Desert South region no longer has the kingdom of the Xiong Nu.

The two generals Huo and Wei will soon return victorious. To celebrate, Huo Q Bing decides to build a temple on the top of Lang Ju Mountains to hold an open air prayer ceremony to the Heavens. The messenger returns to Chang An with this news. Even though I can't go see Qu Bing, I can imagine his cold and composed exterior hiding his excitement and glee on the inside. Right now he must be proudly on a horse surveying the Xiong Nu lands he conquered.

Since he was small he listened to stories from his uncle about fighting the Xiong Nu. He learned to ride a horse and pull a bow and arrow from his uncle. Since he was small he had a dream to stand on Xiong Nu land and conquer the entire vast expanse. Now his dream has finally come true.

Huo Qu Bing has not returned to Chang An but the poetic song he composed for his ceremony to the Heavens arrive first. It is sung all through the streets and in every house and hovel in Chang An. The song has some hidden meanings that I don't understand immediately, with Qu Bing seemingly misusing some phrases. Tian Cao compliments that a warrior can do so well already in writing a song about the end of war and hoping for peace to the nation.

I mull over it and discover that within the song are hidden references to the great historical figure Fang Li, who won many wars but eventually gave up his political career to travel the world. Jiu Ye looked at me with a smile that hid his despair "General Huo admires Fang Li?" I nodded my head, happy inside but also worried "Do you think the Emperor will discern the hidden meaning behind his words?"

“Only one word in the entire text references it, and it has a dual meaning. You know that General Huo once complimented Fang Li so you can guess. How many people in the Han dynasty know General Huo as well as you do? Most people will see General Huo as just a fighting man, and that he used a word incorrectly in this song.”

Tian Cao, who had thought Qu Bing just misused a word, turned red and stuttered “General Huo is not Xi Ma Xiang Ru, why write a song that is now sung all over Chang An?” I reply “Qu Bing is probably using this song to test the Emperor’s intentions. In the song he mentioned Emperor Wu of the Zhou kingdom, a warrior Emperor who nevertheless garnered the love of his people. Qu Bing was complimenting Emperor Wu, but was actually using that to express his own feelings about future warfare.”

Jiu Ye looked at the ground “The current Emperor is enamored of warfare. Now that the Xiong Nu is defeated, he’s worried the Emperor is eyeing Xi Yu next. But General Huo no longer cares about the weakened Xiong Nu kingdom in the Desert North region, much less wants to prey on the weak and defenseless Xi Yu kingdoms. He’s only interested in fighting an opponent like the Xiong Nu when it was at its strongest.”

Tian Cao thought about it and then said “On the surface General Huo appears arrogant and thoughtless, only knowing to barrel full speed ahead. But based on his song, from composing it to sending it back to Chang An, his thoughts are much deeper than realized, and he’s comparable to the Great General Wei in terms of doing things with forethought.”

Qu Bing’s biggest intelligence was letting everything think that he was stupid at everything else other than fighting wars. I felt happy and let out a small smile. But when my eyes met Jiu Ye, my smile froze and inside I felt a twinge of bitterness. Jiu Ye turned his head and wheeled out “We won’t bother you, get some rest!”

In ten days Qu Bing will be back. Since he deployed, my heart finally started to feel at ease. That is, until Wei Shao Er and Wei Jun Ru suddenly came to visit. Those two sisters are usually so chilly towards me, but now they are quite friendly. Liu Che wants to summon me into the Palace to

give birth. They are here to congratulate me since my child will be born into the same treatment as the royal children. It is such a honor and privilege.

Honor and privilege! I see their smiles and want to grab a broom to sweep them out. Do they not know what is behind this great honor and privilege? Do they not know, or don't want to know? Seeking wealth and power in this dangerous place, even Wei Zhi Fu as the Empress has to endure much danger.

It was nearing the end of Summer, and some of the flowers are at the end of their bloom cycle. Isn't life just like that? When the water is full means its about to overflow. When the moon is full means its about to wane. When power is at its peak means its will soon weaken.

Is this the Emperor's response to Qu Bing's song? When Qu Bing returns, I will already be in the Palace, so will he dare to oppose the Emperor and take me back home? When power is at its peak, even one misstep could mean complete destruction. I have made up my mind.

Inside the study, Jiu Ye is flipping through medical books and I barge in and sit right across from him "Jiu Ye, I need to ask you for a favor. You must agree." Jiu Ye's grip on the book tightened and he immediately said "I won't agree."

I stare at him without blinking "I've flipped through all the medical texts these past few days but can't find any that discusses speeding up the date of delivery. I understand the risks, but I have no choice despite knowing I am gambling with my life and the life of my baby."

Jiu Ye's eyes were filled with despair and he softly said "There are other ways. We can leave Chang An immediately, we can leave all this chaos and fighting behind." I stare at him but didn't answer what he said "If you don't agree, then I will find another doctor."

I knew I was forcing him, but right now I have no choice. I cannot

leave Chang An with him, what position would that place Qu Bing in? His expression turned distressed, within his ashen face was pure hopelessness. My heart hurt to the point it felt numb. We really have passed each other by. I have already chosen Huo Qu Bing. No matter what happens, what obstacles and challenges, I will not leave. I will not leave Huo Qu Bing to be alone in Chang An to weather this storm.

I silently get up and walk out, and his weak voice says “I agree.”

I knew he would agree, because he would never place my life in the hands of another person. I don't react and continue to calmly walk outside. I keep my voice steady as I coolly say “Thank you!” But silent tears are falling, the tears are falling for him. And I cannot let him know, I would rather he saw only my seemingly cold figure.

A late Summer storm passes and the ground is wet. When I walk the Palace physician sent to check on me out, I slip on a step and in the eyes of everyone my stomach hits the ground first. But in truth I've used one hand and my knee to temper the impact. To make it more realistic, I let my other arm hit the ground hard and scrape it so that it is bloody. I crush the Cha Mo flower leaves that is hidden in my hand, and the fragrance wafts in through my nose and hits the medicine I drank earlier. It mixes together to induce labor. Soon my entire body is curled into a ball, my sweat and blood seeping through my clothes.

The physician screams for help and Jiu Ye anxiously picks me off the ground. My blood seeps into his white robe, almost like a red flower blooming. His face has not a shred of color, and in his dark eyes I see only fear as deep as the ocean.

Jiu Ye knows this was all orchestrated but he's reacting like it's real. No one will suspect. But when I see him sweating, I know he's not acting. This is his honest reaction. From the moment I drank the labor inducing medicine, my life was on the line.

I force a smile for him to indicate I'm fine, but then I realize I can't control my body anymore. The pain makes me moan and my teeth clench. I

bite my lip until its bleeding. Jiu Ye's brows are furrowed and he puts his hand in my mouth so that I will bite him instead. He doesn't want me to hurt myself. I try to turn away so I don't hurt him but my clenching teeth still bites down on his hand.

His beads of sweat are rolling down his face, almost like his tears are falling. My blood, his blood, my sweat, his sweat, it all mixes together. I taste the sweet acrid blood in my mouth and all my strength dissipates. My consciousness starts to muddle and my bodily pain seems to going away. But my emotional pain appears even more pronounced, so much that my feelings break free of my logical shackles and everything is expressed in my eyes. My tears also cannot be controlled and I just start crying in front of him.

Before I pass out, all I hear is "Yu Er, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry....."

The moment I regain consciousness, the feeling of body-rendering pain causes even the normally tough me to cry out in pain. I don't know how long I have been passed out, but its already dark outside the room. A curtain is pulled across my chest, with two midwives busy behind the curtain and Jiu Ye sitting beside me outside the curtain. He looked tired but he was calm and tightly gripped my hand "Nothing will happen to you. You will be fine." But his shaking hand betrayed his real feelings. He was frightened, so I use my energy to smile and weakly nodded my head.

One hour passes, and another, and yet another. Still there is only indescribable pain. The baby still won't come out. Baby, why don't you come out? Mom's energy is almost all used up. With one more scream from me, the midwife suddenly cried out "The baby is out! It's a boy, and despite being born two months early and is so tiny, it has a lot of energy. You can tell it's not an average baby."

Jiu Ye relaxed "Yu Er, you did well."

One midwife carried the baby out and happily showed him to me. I heard his cries and my heart shook. I felt this immense sorrow that almost

knocked me out. Baby, are you crying because you know that from the moment you are born you won't be able to see your mom?

Jiu Ye pressed on my forehead and woke me up, then he exchanged a look with Tian Cao standing in the doorway. They looked at me and despite all my longing, I nod my head. Tian Cao came inside to take the baby "The nanny has been waiting for quite some time. The Palace has also sent someone to wait for the baby. I will bring the baby to them."

I make this noise that I can't even tell what I'm trying to say. Tian Cao stopped and I stared at the bundle in his arms. After a few moments, I forcefully close my eyes. Jiu Ye said to Tian Cao "You can go!"

Jiu Ye's hand on my wrist, I can feel the heavy emotion and his fingers turning cold. I force a smile "I'm not hurting anymore, just tired and sleepy. My body is strong, you don't need to worry. After a good rest I'll recover."

The midwife cried out "The bleeding won't stop, won't stop." She was afraid to look Jiu Ye in the eye and just lowered her head and shook it. Jiu Ye froze and then in a low voice ordered the midwife to do something and then ordered medicine to be brewed.

Buckets of clean water are brought in one after another, and buckets of bloody water are removed one after another. I wondered if all that blood came from me? There was a sense of bone deep exhaustion coming over me, making me weak and lazy. All I want to do is sleep, but Jiu Ye won't let me. He keeps whispering in my ear and forcing me to stare at his eyes and won't let me close my eyes "Yu Er, do you remember when we first met?"

How could I forget? The vast yellow sand, the blue-green spring water, this white-robed young man that was as clear as the moon above the Sky Mountain.

"Do you remember that outfit? It was given to me by a good friend in

Luo Lan. He said it was for my wife, and laughed that since I had a wedding dress, my bride will be sure to appear. Then you appeared. Despite the rags on you, it couldn't hide your spirit, an entire body filled with fearlessness but your eyes showed hidden sadness. But your face had only the most brilliant smile. It was the first time I had heard a girl laugh out loud without reservation like that. It was like the entire universe was under your control. At that moment, I thought only about how beautiful you would look wearing that outfit. But.....but I never got to see you wearing it.....”

My eyes teared up and, drop by drop, the tears fell on the palm of his hand. I try valiantly to listen to him but his face turns blurry. My eyes cloud over with this white fog and everything grows faint “Jiu Ye, am I dying?” Jiu Ye tightly gripped my hand “No, no, you’re not.....” I don’t know if he’s trying to convince me or himself.

I lay in his embrace without any fear, completely calm. Things I would never say I finally tell him “Jiu Ye, I’m sorry. What I owe you, I will owe you for this lifetime. I always wanted you to be happy, and I used to think of many ways just to make you more at ease and to not let anyone hurt you. But in the end the person who hurt you the most was me.”

His face was lightly pressed against mine and I felt the dampness. Who was crying?

“Yu Er, the person who needs to be sorry is me. I was correct about entering the Palace, your grudge with Li Yan likely started because of me, otherwise you wouldn’t have gotten close to her or helped her enter the Palace. You did everything right, and I was the one who always kept you outside. If I had been honest with you, then we wouldn’t have this pain today.”

Xiao Feng brought medicine and Jiu Ye fed it to me. Every sip felt like it took every ounce of my strength. Jiu Ye wiped my sweat “I know it’s hard for you to hold on, but you have to hold on. You cannot give up, otherwise many people will be devastated.”

I thought about Qu Bing, about our new son, and I felt like my body gained a bit more strength. Jiu Ye started to sing the Xiong Nu ballad I once sang for him, his voice swirling in my ears. In tune with the song, he inserted needles into my body. “Yu Er, I now know that all I want is for you to be alive. I don’t care who you are with, I just want you to be alive. I just want to know that you are alive and happy, then I will be happy. Didn’t you say you didn’t want to see me sad. Then you must stay alive so that I won’t be sad.”

My eyes slowly closed and I heard Jiu Ye’s voice “You must stay alive, you must stay alive, you must stay alive.....”

His voice, with such conviction and insistence to fight against the Heavens, even though my consciousness was scattered, but it became imprinted with another voice from a long time ago “You must stay alive, promise Papa, you must stay alive.”

A very long dark corridor, with a faint light at the end. I chase the light and see a wolf pack running ahead, including the wolf that nursed me. I rush to catch up but the wolves disappear and Yu Dan is there. He smiles and waves at me, and I call out wanting to run to him. Suddenly Papa appeared behind Yu Dan, and I happily call out “Papa” and run towards him like I did as a child. But he didn’t open his arms like he used to to embrace me, but he looked very angry like he didn’t want to see me.

I stand in place not moving, thinking of something but not being able to remember. I look back and its all dark, but there is warmth and light ahead, with Yu Dan and Papa. I take another step forward and see Papa’s despairing face staring at me. His sad face triggered something.....my mind flashed two blurry faces. Will they be sad like this?

You must stay alive, you must stay alive....

I don’t know what that means but it stops me from going forward. I take a step back towards the darkness and Papa smiles. My body begins to hurt.

You must stay alive, you must stay alive....

Every step backward takes me further from the light and my body is in more pain. Going forward means happiness, going backward means pain. But Papa is smiling and those two faces in my mind also seem overjoyed, so no matter the pain I keep walking backwards. I don't know why I'm willing to endure so much pain that I feel crushed, rather than let the two of them feel sad. Step by step I endure the pain and walk backwards.....

"Yu Er!" Two voices call out simultaneously in joy. In my eyes I see two different faces, both haggard and exhausted. Both reach out for me, and both stop right before touching my face. Huo Qu Bing turned to look at Jiu Ye, whose initial joy at my awakening gradually turns into sadness. His face still has his usual smile but his hands turn into a fist. The veins on his hand are still faintly twitching but he slowly pulls his hand back. He turned his wheelchair around and headed out "I'll tell the kitchen to prepare some food."

Huo Qu Bing silently sat on the pallet and carefully embraced me. His hands are clasped together but his arms aren't touching me, but remain in a protective stance. It's clear he's hiding his worry and uncertainty. I try hard to turn my head towards him but can't move it so he helps place my head on his shoulder. He finally had a smile and truly embraced me, then he said "Yu Er, let's not have any more children."

Mention of children makes my heart ache, so I force a smile "And someone wanted an entire football team! Didn't you want a father-son team?" His chin was resting on my head "Nothing is as important as you. I don't even want to see the baby right now. As I stayed beside you, I thought about how giving birth to him caused this to happen to you, and I didn't want to see him."

I hesitated and then asked "Did you see the baby?"

He was silent and his voice was somber when he said "No. He was already taken to the Palace when I returned. The Emperor bestowed the name Tan, and he will be raised by the Empress herself. He will be treated

like the Crown Prince was treated. Because he was born two months early, he is weak and all the Palace physicians are there. The Palace is all atwitter with this new baby. You were at death's door so I just bowed to the Emperor and gave him a quick update of the battle before hurrying here."

I see his blood shot eyes and my heart feels warm and ache for him "You again went days without sleep, right? Sleep first!" He shook his head "I want to keep you company here, I don't want to leave." I smell his familiar scent and it gives me an indescribable feeling of comfort "Then sleep here. I really missed you." I've never said such things to him first so he's stunned so much he props himself up and stares at me "What did you say?"

I pout and refuse to answer him so he stares at me "Repeat what you just said." I casually say "Good things shouldn't be said twice." He looked disappointed and laid back down on the pillow. I whisper in his ears "I really missed you. I really missed you, so don't even leave me alone in Chang An again."

He was initially happy but it turned into forlorn sadness. His hands brushed across my lips "I'm sorry." He must know everything that happened since he's been away, and I don't know how he thinks about everything. Perhaps his "I'm sorry" includes his suspicion of Empress Wei now, and the worry about the baby being raised in the Palace.

I was uncertain and hesitated about whether to tell him the truth about the baby, but he suddenly said "The Xiong Nu have been pushed out of the Desert South. They will have no more energy to fight wars anymore, and at most it will be small tussles in the future."

My heart shook "How did the Emperor reward you?" "Just the same old wealth and power type of rewards" his voice was filled with exhaustion and distaste. His usual excitement and bright aura around his eyes are all gone.

His battle with the Xiong Nu was because of a childhood dream, but with his success means he gains higher positions and more power in court.

The initial excitement about being so powerful will pass and afterwards comes more than just fighting the Xiong Nu, it comes with political intrigue and battles in court. From now on, the burden of power will only grow more heavy.

He never paid attention in the past to these things. He once said to me “It’s not that I don’t understand, it’s that I don’t care.” But now he can’t avoid it, he’s already been dragged into it. “Yu Er, let’s go home tonight, okay?” After months on the battlefield and traveling thousands of miles in the desert, and not being able to rest because of me, he was closing his eyes even as he spoke.

I let down all my burdens and softly reply “Okay, tonight let’s go.....home.” He feel asleep with a smile on his face. I put my head in his chest and snuggle there listening to his steady breathing. I actually am already home! Wherever you are at is home, your embrace is home!

.....

Despite wanting to leave that night, Huo Qu Bing slept until the next morning. When we left the Shi Estate, only Tian Cao came out to send us off. Jiu Ye went to the kitchen and never appeared again, and we all forget that ever happened. Tian Cao gave a long list of medicines to Huo Qu Bing, saying that the Palace physicians can treat me within this month, but don’t use any of their medicines. He must strictly follow the instructions on this list. One month later, a “trusted” doctor can treat me and prescribe medicine. Huo Qu Bing looked it over and then unexpectedly bowed to Tian Cao, who smiled and said “I will let Jiu Ye know.”

Qu Bing didn’t trust anyone else so he insisted on carrying me to the carriage himself. I can’t convince him otherwise so I let him be. As we walk past the lake in the Shi Estate, the Lover’s Vines along the edge of the lake are almost ready to bloom. The white is not yet out, but the golden flowers glitter along the green leaves. Huo Qu Bing took a look and didn’t change his expression as he carried me between the Lover’s Vines. I bury my head in his neck as I cannot bear to look.

Before the carriage has even stopped, a fourteen year old boy comes running out calling “big brother”. His voice showed his happiness. When he saw Qu Bing carrying me down, he quickly helped hold the curtains up. Qu Bing looked at him with a warmth he rarely displayed “Yu Er, this is Huo Guang, my younger brother. I went to see my father on my way back and Guang wanted to come to Chang An so I brought him.”

Being called Qu Bing’s younger brother gave Huo Guang a sense of pride and nervousness, like he wanted to be worthy of it. He bowed to me stiffly and said “Sister-in-law, are you feeling better?” Even though everyone knew my relationship with Qu Bing, but no one dared to openly admit it. His calling me “sister-in-law” left me unsure how to respond. Qu Bing happily smiled and said to Huo Guang “Your sister-in-law is embarrassed. When she’s recovered, you two can talk all you want. What have you been up to these past few days?”

Huo Guang happily told him everything he did, his face full of excitement. From a rural area to the capital of the Empire that is Chang An, even an adult will get excited, much less a child. Plus he entered Chang An as the younger brother of the most acclaimed General Huo Qu Bing. I can see Qu Bing quietly listening and in his eyes I can see his protectiveness towards his younger brother. Huo Guang is smart and can tell I’ve already accepted him. He looked relieved and confident, not calling me sister-in-law anymore, but still being very warm and familiar with me.

When I am fully recovered, the late Summer has turned into early Winter. This is the longest I have ever been sick in my entire life. It was due to my heartiness and Jiu Ye’s medical skills that I was saved. Any other woman would already be six feet under.

When it’s late at night and I think about it, I break into a cold sweat. I can’t believe how audacious I was. If anything went wrong, once Qu Bing found out, would he ever forgive Jiu Ye? But for the sake of the baby, I didn’t even consider these things. All I could think about was how to protect my child so that he would not be taken into the dark Palace where there was no sunlight. I would never allow my baby to become a chess piece for Liu Che to control Qu Bing.

Chapter 35: Trust

What Huo Qu Bing described as “just the usual wealth and power” turned out to be so vast it stuns the entire court and nation. With this victory, Emperor Wu of Han awards him wealth equal to five thousand eight hundred households. But that is just the beginning.

The key is that all the generals who went out with Huo Qu Bing all got an official title and rewards. There are so many of his subordinates made generals and dukes that it takes up half the court of such positions. Other than Li Gan, who is conflicted towards Huo Qu Bing, everyone else who served with him are loyal and devoted since they went through life and death together. Especially the surrendered Xiong Nu leaders all are grateful to Huo Qu Bing and admire his courage and conviction. The bond Huo Qu Bing develops with these people cannot be understood by the scholars in court or the ordinary folks.

The position of Da Shi Ma (head of the entire military) is traditionally held by only one person, and in recent years it has been Wei Qing. To take away Wei Qing’s control, Liu Che purposely makes both Generals Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing split the position, and raises Huo Qu Bing’s general rank to equal Wei Qing. With this, Huo Qu Bing’s rank in court has surpassed what Wei Qing worked years to attain.

Actually Liu Che, as uncle to Huo Qu Bing, knows him better than his aunt Empress Wei Zhi Fu. Liu Che may not ever trust anyone, but he knows that Huo Qu Bing is trustworthy on the battlefield and is not someone who cares about court politics. Huo Qu Bing will never pander in order to seek more power or wealth. He can chase the Xiong Nu for days and nights, but he doesn’t spend a moment with the court chatter. He often silently sits on the side and cares not to make friends with the scholar officials. This is probably what differentiates Wei Qing and Huo Qu Bing the most. Wei Qing, to protect and secure his family’s control, will endure and be willing to be solicitous even to Consort Li when necessary. But these things Huo Qu Bing will never do. Compared to the unfathomable Wei Qing, Liu Che clearly would rather trust Huo Qu Bing more.

But in truth, Qu Bing understands and sees all the politicking in court. He just doesn't care, and he has his own way of dealing with it. Those who are adept at political sweet talking often find themselves hitting a brick wall with Huo Qu Bing. Take Li Gan, for instance, his numerous tactics all end up with nothing in the face of Qu Bing's straight forward nature.

Because Liu Che is openly trying to push down Wei Qing while preferring Huo Qu Bing, the door to the Wei estate grow more and more quiet as the door to the Huo estate grows ever more popular. Some people who followed Wei Qing go test the waters with Huo Qu Bing and surprisingly find themselves rewarded. When this news travels to Wei Qing, he just smiles "If people want to leave, why keep them?" Huo Qu Bing's open door attitude and Wei Qing's hands off attitude leads to all Wei Qing's followers except for Ren An turning to throw their lot with Huo Qu Bing.

It's not clear how Wei Qing sees Huo Qu Bing, or whether he understands the difficult position Huo Qu Bing is in. He treats Huo Qu Bing the same as usual, but his eldest son is very angry with Huo Qi Bing. When he sees Huo Qu Bing, he's not polite or courteous, responding to questions with curt answers.

The Empress hears that I am recovered, and knowing a mother's heart, uses the excuse of a Palace banquet to call me in to see my son. Despite giving birth to Qu Bing's child, I still do not have an official title. The Empress wanted to seat me elsewhere, but Qu Bing publicly held my hand and said "Yu Er sits with me." Auntie Yun wanted to say something but the Empress just smiled "Add another seat next to Qu Bing."

I was initially worried about how to handle this, but feeling the warmth of his hand, I suddenly don't care anymore. Nothing is as important as our entwined hands. Since Qu Bing is worried about my safety and want me next to him to feel reassured, then why do I have to concern myself with what other people think.

Huo Qu Bing held my hand and we walked through the crowd of people staring at us. I confidently return their looks. Because of the man

whose hand is holding mine, none of your looks can touch the happiness in my heart. I will not lower my head or avert my eyes.

Huo Qu Bing sat me down and then shot me a surprised look. He's shocked that the normally carefully me would docilely follow his way of doing whatever he wanted. I secretly make a face at him and he smiles at me, his surprise turning into tender affection.

The nanny brings the baby and walked towards us. Huo Qu Bing appeared unaffected on the surface, but I can feel his hand tremble slightly. My heart was filled with all these feelings, not longing but instead regret and guilt. I even want to escape and avert my eyes from looking at the baby.

Li Yan initially watched Qu Bing and I with coldness in her eyes, but now she has a slight smile. I suddenly am reminded that there are unseen eyes looking at me. Since I selfishly made the decision that day for the sake of my baby, then now is not the time for me to show my guilt.

I force myself to look at the baby in the nanny's arms. It's strange, his innocent dark eyes make me feel this ache inside and I reach out for the baby. All these feelings welled up inside and my arms are shaking. The nanny sees me like this and is hesitant to hand me the baby. The baby stares at me, and then lets out a laugh. I see his laughter and I can't contain it any longer, my heart cries inside for my baby. Are you smiling like this as well?

Huo Qu Bing reached out for the baby, and his hands used to the sword and arrow is suddenly very clumsy with the baby. The baby starts to loudly cry and the nanny hurries to comfort him. The Empress sees us and says to the nanny "Take Tan Er away." She said to us "When you both have calmed down more, you can spend time alone with Tan Er. The Emperor treats Tan Er even better than he treated Ju Er. Thankfully Ju Er is also very loving towards Tan Er, otherwise I worry Ju Er will get jealous!"

Her words caused the entire banquet to start laughing, everyone is envious. They say the Crown Prince is so loving and give congratulations

to Wei Shao Er. Huo Qu Bing and I sit there in silence. Li Yan's mouth slightly tilts upward as she smiles.

Huo Tan has his thumb in his mouth and makes little cooing noises as he sleeps soundly. Huo Qu Bing sits on the pallet and rocks his cradle with his hand, staring silently at the baby. I see Qu Bing like this and my heart hurts so badly like a rock has fallen on it. I want to tell him the truth but when I look around I see Li Yan staring at us from outside the window. She raises her eyebrow and shakes her head at me with a smile, before departing.

I see Qu Bing staring at the baby in a daze and I chase after Li Yan. She clearly knew I was coming because she was waiting in a remote area. Before I said anything, she asked "How does it feel?" I don't know what to say or how to respond so I just stare at her without an expression.

"Jin Yu, from now on, for every day Huo Tan is in the Palace, you won't be able to smile. You will worry about him every day. This child is like his father and gets along with the Emperor quite well. Right now he's the Emperor's treasure and no one dares touch him. But babies are prone to accidents. A fall here, a trip there, arms and legs are easy to injure. At that time, the Emperor will at most kill people who didn't take good care of him."

If it wasn't for her, I could have married Qu Bing; if it wasn't for her, Liu Che might not have taken the baby into the Palace; if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have done this plan, putting lives at risk; all of Jiu Ye's pain and agony during those days were because of her; Qu Bing's guilt and self-blame is all because of her.....

She was smiling so full of herself, so happy, that this moment she wasn't just Li Yan with her calculated plans, she was just a woman who suffered in the Palace taking out her rage on me. If I was in pain, then she would feel better about her life. All my concealed and built up rage suddenly exploded and in a flash I was standing right in front of her and my hands were around her neck. Li Yan's face turned white and she started coughing, though she still smiled "I forgot you knew martial arts! But this

is not the desert of the Xi Yu region for you to do as you will! Do you dare? Can you handle the consequences?"

So she's not the only one gone crazy, I'm also going crazy. I take a deep breath and slowly release my hands and smile and bow to her "Will your highness please forgive my lapse."

I reach out to fix her robe and say in a low voice "Your highness, neither Qu Bing nor I are kindhearted people. If Tan Er has even one hair on his head missing, I will have one thousand Luo Lan people die. If Tan Er fell anywhere, I will have ten thousand Luo Lan people die. If he has anything else happen to him, I will have ALL of Luo Lan.....go to the grave with him!"

Li Yan stared at me in shock, and before she can response, I caress her cheek and continue "Don't worry, I will never reveal your identity. I will never reveal your identity. At most all I will do is destroy Luo Lan. Qu Bing holds extensive military power. Even if he was just passing through Luo Lan on the way to war, he can easily kill tens of thousands of Luo Lan citizens. The Emperor won't even care. Ay! I wonder what the population of Luo Lan is? Or I can set a trap for Luo Lan to do something that angers the Emperor, and if he gets angry, he can easily wipe out Luo Lan."

Li Yan's eyes were wide open "You wouldn't do it." The more I argue the less believable it is, so I just smile and walk away while keeping my eyes trained on hers. She sees my expression and starts to doubt her own words. Seeing her expression, I know my threat has worked. I turn and walk away. Tan Er, this is the only thing I can do for you as a mother.

Li Yan started laughing behind me "Jin Yu, you...." I didn't turn around. She and I have nothing to discuss any further.

Since leaving the Palace, Qu Bing has been sitting in front of the sand board. He sits there the entire night. I thought he was strategizing as a way to help him deal with his frustration so I don't bother him. I want to give him space to to work through things himself.

Before sleeping I walk over there and see that the sand is covered in the character “Tan”. He sees me and smile, pulling me into his embrace “Yu Er, no matter what the Emperor says, I will bring our child back to your side.” I startle and hurriedly say “Right now the political situation is precarious, neither the Empress nor the Great General Wei will agree with you opposing the Emperor.”

Li Guang’s death has caused a lot of officials to support the Li family and start opposing the Wei family’s stronghold on power. Plus the populace has very high regard for Li Guang and they blame Wei Qing for his terrible death. In court, neither Li Yan nor any of the other concubines opposing Empress Wei will let this opportunity pass them by. Everyone will align to topple the Wei family first and then deal later with what to do. All the factions opposing the Crown Prince are working together now despite the fact that they may be enemies down the road.

Li Guang’s younger brother Li Cai is currently the prime minister and the head of hundreds of ministers. He got there from a military background, and since Li Guang’s suicide he has been calm and trying to control all the Li family members. But it’s exactly his calm that ought to make people afraid. The more calm he is, the more dangerous he is. Right now Empress Wei is no longer the woman who was beloved by the Emperor, and Wei Qing is now longer the Emperor’s most trust general. Wei Zhi Fu may be Empress, but everyone knows that the Emperor adores Li Yan above all in the Palace. Wei Qing may be a general, but everyone can see the Emperor has already relied on Huo Qu Bing in order to take away Wei Qing’s power.

Right now in court, Huo Qu Bing has become the most pivotal person, with both sides trying to gauge his attitude. If he can’t stay above the fray and with one move, either side will try to destroy him. Outside attacks aren’t scary, what’s worse is if the Wei family tries to take him down so that Liu Che can’t rely on him to oppose Wei Qing. The Wei family has no idea that underneath Huo Qu Bing’s silence and coldness is a passionate heart. Perhaps they don’t care to know since they are immersed in political strategizing all day long.

Huo Qu Bing heard what I said and didn’t understand why I appeared

so concerned for the Wei family. Once he realized what I was worried about, I could see sadness flash through his eyes and then it changed into warmth and a smile for me. He hugged me tightly “Silly Yu Er, you don’t need to worry about me. I will be protecting you and the baby for the rest of your lives. I won’t be so easily set up by anyone.”

Outside the curtains there was a slight sound. Huo Qu Bing was likely too focused on me, or he thought it was Uncle Chen and this was his home, so his defenses were down and didn’t even hear it. After a moment, Qing Wu walks in with the tea tray from outside the curtains, her face red and afraid of looking directly at us sitting together in an embrace. She courteously places the tea tray down before bowing and scurrying out.

Huo Qu Bing didn’t even pay attention to her, but I smiled at how fleet of foot she was, just like her name suggested. How many such talented people are hiding in this Huo Estate?

My hands encircled Qu Bing’s neck and I kiss him. Since he’s been back, we’ve spent the last few months together, but because of my health he’s kept himself under tight control. With my forward gesture, he lets his defenses down and passionately kisses me back, picking me up and carrying me into the bedroom.

The moment we lay down we are completely entwined together. Initially I was doing this partly for show, to get us into the bedroom so I could talk privately with him. But now I’m just as aroused and completely lost in the moment. He wanted to slow down and he propped himself up and looked at me. He kissed me on the forehead and then continued kissing as he murmured “I’ve missed you so much.....”

With my one sliver of alertness I curl around his body and press up even tighter. He was initially trying to slow down for my sake but with my actions he can barely hold back as he cries out “Yu Er” and then his hands move down.....

“Qu Bing, Tan Er is not our son.” I press right next to his ear and whisper softly. His entire body stiffens and he stares at me. My eyes fill

with tears and I quickly hug him “I’m sorry, I couldn’t let our son enter the Palace. So I begged Jiu Ye to find a weak orphaned baby to swap with our son. I didn’t mean to lie to you. But I worry that you are always in and out of the Palace, and when everyone is staring at you, they might notice something off. I’ve tried many times to tell you, but always there was a reason....”

I see his face turning darker and darker and my voice trails off. All my excuses and explanations disappear. It was all my fault, why even explain? My tears are swimming in my eyes but I try valiantly not to let them fall. Qu Bing’s chest is rising and falling heavily and I’m wondering if he’s furious. I let go of him to turn and leave, but then I can’t bear it and grab onto his robe.

He stared at me for some time before saying very clearly “I am angry, but not because you lied to me. No matter if you lie to me, I know you’re doing it for us. This idea is not something I won’t be able to understand. But I’m angry that you put your life at risk. Was your early delivery also planned? Otherwise how could you have a baby ready to swap out without the Palace suspecting?”

I was ready for his censure, but who knew he wasn’t angry at my deception. He has already come to trust me completely. My tears finally fall and I embrace him tightly “It will never happen again, it will never happen again.....”

He suddenly punched the pallet violently and muttered “That Meng Jiu! How come he does whatever you ask? How could he let you take such a risk? Does he have the baby? Is the baby healthy?” I reply through my tears “Yes, the baby is already out of Chang An and somewhere very safe. Even though he was born early by two months, but he’s not like the weak Tan Er in the Palace. He’s very healthy and very alert.”

He quickly wiped away my tears “Don’t cry. I’m angry but I’m more upset at myself. I vowed before your Papa’s grave that I would take good care of you and not you be unhappy even once. But since you came back to Chang An with me, it’s only been you enduring things for me. This all

happened because of me, because I wasn't by your side so you had to endure it all alone."

The more he talked the more I cried "Good Yu Er, don't cry anymore. I'm not angry anymore. Good Yu Er, no matter what happens in the future, you can't use your life to risk it. If something happened to you, how will I....." His voice caught in his throat and his eyes were red. After some time, he softly said "You are not just my beloved Yu Er, you might be the only family I have in my life going forward. The only one who believes in me, who trusts me, who stands by my side. Do you understand?"

I vigorously nod my head "I won't ever do something like this again. I....." I rub the area between his eyes "Even though I was unconscious and you were by my side during that time, but I know the pain and sorrow in your heart. In the future I will take good care of myself, I won't ever let you go through this again."

His eyes gradually warmed and he held my face and kissed me soundly. He then started kissing from the corner of my lips all the way to my eyes, kissing my tears away. The fire between us flared up once again and became impossible to quench. All my rational thought went away and I murmur "Qu Bing, you also must never let me go through something like that." He indistinctly replied before he shifted and we were joined together.....

.....

The Spring arrived not at all like early Spring. The cold is still vicious and even the foliage doesn't appear to be coming anytime soon. The calm in Chang An for the last six months is suddenly at an end. The Prime Minister of the Han dynasty Li Cai is accused of privately using sacred holy lands for his own use. Liu Che is very superstitious and believes heavily in praying to the gods and Heaven. He places great trust in the Taoist priests and shamans in the Palace, so much so that even the princes and princesses are polite to those folks. To have one's own Prime Minister using sacred holy lands enrages Liu Che and he has Li Cai tossed in prison awaiting judgment.

General Li Guang lived a clean and upstanding life, good to people, generous and forthright. He earned a lot of reward during his time, but when he died he left no wealth. When his coffin was carried into Chang An, the citizens of the entire city wept for him. Now Li Guang has died for only a short time and his younger brother Li Cai has been accused of stealing sacred holy lands for his own use. This scandal rocks the nation. People do not understand politics so they believe this and curse the Li family to the sky.

Li Gan tries to round up support all over court, even coming to the Huo Estate, but Qu Bing does not see him.

When Empress Chen was cast out many years ago, one important detail involved a voodoo doll being found in Empress Chen's chambers that featured the concubines who the Empress adored. Rumor has it Empress Chen would curse them every day. I have my own doubts about those voodoo dolls, which are easy for maids to slip into Empress Chen's chambers. Same with this sacred holy land, which could have been written incorrectly on the ledgers so that Li Cai could easily have missed it when he was apportioning the land.

This is classic warfare, with the Wei family seemingly doing every out in the open, but secretly keeping this trump card to push the enemy into a dead end. But things are not yet finalized, so the winner remains to be seen. In the middle of the trial for this case, Li Cai commits suicide in prison. The former General, Duke, and Prime Minister ends up killing himself over the misuse of a piece of sacred holy land.

Suicide? I laugh. If Wei Ji and I died in prison back then, would we have been coined with a suicide out of guilt moniker? Within a short six months, the two highest Li family officials Li Guang and Li Cai both committed suicide and the family has barely finished with one grieving period before it begins another. The two great Generals from one family ended up not dying in the hands of the Xiong Nu, but both by suicide.

Huo Qu Bing coldly watches all of this unfolding from the sidelines. He continues to train, hunt, and even has a football field built in the estate.

The cheers on the football field remain energetic, but deep within Qu Bing's eyes I can see his disdain for all this.

Gong Xun He and Wei Jun Ru come visit Qu Bing, claiming it was along the way, but really they are eyeing the now empty Prime Minister spot. In fact, everyone in court is eyeing that position. Wei Jun Ru sees me and is so solicitous, asking how I've been and telling me to go see her if Qu Bing is ever mean to me. Since we're family.

Qu Bing might seem cold on the outside but he actually really treasures his family. His last name may be Huo but he grew up in the Wei family, so their refusal to accept me has always hurt him. Now he sees the Wei elders so warm towards me and I can see it makes him happy. I sigh and the grasp Wei Jun Ru's hand back "With Auntie standing up for me, Qu Bing will never be mean to me. I've been embroidering recently and can't seem to do it well. Since Auntie is here, can you give me some pointers?"

Gong Xun He heard me and could see I understood what was happening. Wei Jun Ru looks at Qu Bing "There are lots of clever ladies out there who can embroider. Is it for Qu Bing? If so then I must go see it." Qu Bing's gaze brushed past me and he couldn't contain his pleasure. I take Wei Jun Ru out while Qu Bing and Gong Xun He continue talking.

It's nighttime and I can barely contain my sleepiness I hear Qu Bing softly call "Yu Er", but then says nothing else. I smile and bit him lightly on his shoulder "How come you're not asleep? You can do whatever you want. I may not want you embroiled in the fight for succession because it's a life and death proposition. But if it want to do it, then no matter what I don't have an opinion on it."

He didn't say anything other than tightly pulling me into his embrace. His hands quickly decides it wants to do other stuff and I whisper in his ear "You're not stressed anymore so now you want to bother me! I'm sleepy! You let me sleep.....oh!" He smiled and kissed me, effectively stopping what I was going to say.

Chapter 36: Death Trap

For the empty Prime Minister position left by Li Cai's suicide, every faction works hard to push for their own candidate. Huo Qu Bing continues his usual stance at court of being cold and uninvolved. He goes to train the soldiers, play football, hunting, and making merry. In the football field, Crown Prince Liu Ju becomes a regular participant. Huo Qu Bing even takes Liu Ju out hunting, the two cousins not following court protocol and going into the mountains without any servants or guards. They are gone for three days and return bearing lots of animals.

Because the Crown Prince was gone for three entire days, the normally gentle Empress Wei is furious. Liu Ju kneels before his elders and asks forgiveness. He puts the entire blame on himself and tries to say Huo Qu Bing had nothing to do with it. Empress Wei sighs "Both of you cousins need to be punished!" Turns out Liu Che shakes his head and says "Forget it! Forget it! Qu Bing's wild personality isn't new. The first time he went into battle he took eight hundred soldiers and attacked a Xiong Nu army base. We should be relieved that he didn't take Ju Er on a trip to Xi Yu."

Qu Bing not following rules and doing what he wants is nothing new. What is new is how close he and Liu Che are becoming. When Fall arrives, Liu Che decides that the Crown Prince's tutor shall be the next Prime Minister. After the suicide of Li Guang, the battle against the Wei family finally comes to an end, with the Wei family netting a major victory.

I've never spoken with the Crown Prince, and my impression of him remains from the gossip in court. His personality is very different than Liu Che, and more like Wei Qing and Wei Zhi Fu. Even though he is the Crown Prince, he is very polite and solicitous to everyone. He understands the suffering of the common people, and takes a very different perspective than the military-minded Liu Che.

The Crown Prince's behavior this time really stunned me. He knows Huo Qu Bing's intentions and agreed to go out hunting with him. Based on

his usual reserved and cautious personality, everyone will know this was Qu Bing's idea. But he took all the blame and kept insisting it was his fault. This makes Huo Qu Bing look even more culpable, and everyone will praise the Crown Prince for being so generous and kind.

"Qu Bing, the Crown Prince is still young but he's so calculating already." Qu Bing smiled wanly "In his position, being calculating isn't a bad thing. Don't blame him. If he didn't have some deviousness, then we ought to worry he won't be able to handle things later."

Even though Qu Bing said this, I can see the hurt and disappointment in his eyes. I feel hurt and frustration for him. He is doing everything to help them, but they still don't trust him completely. They want him to work for them, but they also continue to find ways to chip at his power and influence in court in any way possible.

I want to change the subject so I stick my tongue out at him and then pout "If you want to be a scapegoat then fine with me! But....." I walk up to him and tug on his arm "You have to take me out hunting. I hear the Emperor has invited all hundreds of ministers and officials to Gan Quan Palace (his Summer retreat) to hunt. Take me....."

He immediately said "No!" I shake his arm and keep pleading, but he walks away and refuses to look at me "I'm off to the army base, let's discuss when I get back." I ignore his escape tactic and stick by his side, shaking his arm non stop. He pleads with me "Yu Er, later when I have time, I'll take you to the mountains for a few days of fun. Why go with them? It's a hunt but really it's just more political arrows and slings. You won't have fun."

I humph "When you have time? When do you have any free time these days? You claim to be busy with important business, or maybe even unimportant business. Playing football and hunting, all you do is play. Everything you do has an ulterior motive, so you're just exhausted inside. I can tell you don't have much free time and don't expect you to take me out to play. So take me now! Take me....."

As we walked, all the maids saw me whining to Qu Bing and they all lower their heads and look away. Qu Bing sighed “You’ve become so shameless now!” I was staring at him this entire time so I didn’t notice our surroundings. With his reminder, I felt a bit embarrassed but I didn’t want to concede defeat “I learned it all from the Great General Huo! Since they’ve seen even more intimate moments, why do I have to worry about? Take me! Take me please.....” I continue chanting the same spell.

He finally couldn’t handle it anymore and turned to look at me. Initially his eyes were very sure but once he saw my expression, he gave a long sigh and shook his head dejectedly “Fine! Stop giving me the pitiful whining look. I’ll take you.”

I burst into a brilliant smile while he smiled in defeat. But once he saw how happy I was, he turned happy as well. He reached out and lightly pinched my cheeks “No wonder Meng Jiu does whatever you want and can never say no to you.....”

I don’t know if my smile stayed the same, but his immediately disappeared. He realized what he said unconsciously, joking about me and Jiu Ye, so he swallowed the rest of what he was going to say. He changed the subject casually “This is fine, go back now.” I see we are at the front door of the estate so I nod.

My eyes see him off before my face finally crumbles. I owe Jiu Ye so much, and the only thing he wants is the one thing I cannot give him in this lifetime. So all I can do is live happily like he wanted for me. Then maybe he will feel some comfort. But then what kind of comfort could that be? I raise my head to look at the blue sky. Are there really Gods who live up there? Then I beg you to please let Jiu Ye forget me, to give him true happiness.

We were on the carriage out of Chang An headed for Gan Quan Palace, but Huo Qu Bing still couldn’t understand why I insisted on coming for the hunt. He knows I hate gathering with nobles and courtiers. And this hunt will be all such nobles and courtiers. Crown Prince Liu Ju, the three princes, Great General Wei, Gong Xun He, Li Gan, Li Guang Li, Zhao Puo

Nu..... A bunch of new and old nobles, all the important ministers in the court. With so many people there, the security is sure to be tight.

It appears like a hunt, but it could turn into a monumental political moment at the blink of an eye. Who knows which faction is hunting the other at this banquet. I don't want to stay in Chang An worrying, I just want to stay by his side. Even if I can't help, at least if anything happened we would be together.

When Liu Che saw me, he pointed at Huo Qu Bing and shook his head with a smile. Huo Qu Bing saw Li Yan standing behind Liu Che and also smiled "Your servant I once again have the same idea as Your majesty."

Liu Che laughed "The same idea is good. With you blocking for me, those folks can't annoy me and claim that I'm a ruler who is mired in womanly wiles and can't rule. Who says a proud and true man can't have his emotional safe harbor. Living such a life is the true measure of a man." Huo Qu Bing and Liu Che toasted each other after that little speech. The relationship between them resembled that of warriors living by the creed of honor, rather than an Emperor and his subject.

No wonder Liu Che favors Huo Qu Bing. Deep down they share a lot of similarities, with very proud and passionate personalities, but neither adheres to the rules and restrictions. But in another way they are nothing alike. One seeks power and the other eschews it. And this is yet another reason Liu Che trust Huo Qu Bing. Li Yan wasn't very well and she rested in the carriage in a very tired way. She must not be doing well these days, plus her health was never very good. With her inner worries, no wonder she's constantly sick. Seems like Liu Che specifically took her out of the Palace to cheer her up.

Liu Che truly adores Li Yan like no other in his harem. Coming out to hunt, he doesn't care about the inconvenience and still wants to bring along a Li Yan who probably would topple over if a gust of wind hit her.

Gan Quan Palace is located on Gan Quan Mountain, hidden deep in the woods with rocky formations, streams, and an unending spectacular

view. Qu Bing has been here with Wei Qing and the Emperor since when he was a kid so he's intimately familiar with this place. As we entered the mountain, he pointed to every place and told me all about it.

Finally he just led me away from the entire procession, not even taking the horses, and we ended up walking hand-in-hand through the woods. We don't know when the others arrived at the Palace, but we played the entire way up so it was dark by the time we arrived at Gan Quan Palace.

We still didn't take the major road and instead continued to amble up across the little streams and over the rocks. Between an outcropping of rocks we could vaguely see two people standing there. We both have above average eye sight, and with even a little moonlight, we immediately know who it is.

I was momentarily stunned but then I composed myself, whereas Qu Bing was shocked beyond belief and he immediately stopped and in his eyes was pure disbelief. It was impossible to tell if this was a chance encounter or one of Li Yan's specially orchestrated "encounters". We see Li Gan kneeling and bowing before Li Yan and wishing her well. Li Yan reached out her hand to tell him to rise, and the moment Li Gan rose he reached out and grabbed her fingertips.

Li Yan was likely as taken aback by Li Gan's gesture as we both were. Her face was shock and her body shook, and in her eyes there were unshed tears. The normally smart and alert Li Yan turned into a rock and didn't immediately pull her hand back. She just stood there staring dumbly at Li Gan. Li Gan raised his head and looked directly at Li Yan. Their eyes met and he appeared to shock himself out of his stupor and he immediately released her fingers and took a few steps back.

Even though it was mere seconds, so short I wondered if I was seeing things, and it was just three fingers and Li Gan probably didn't even feel the warmth from Li Yan's hand, but the explosion of hidden emotion between them was stunning to see. It wasn't clear if Li Yan was planning on saying anything to Li Gan, but right now she just said nothing and

rushed away from Li Gan. She was moving so fast that neither Huo Qu Bing nor I could hide ourselves and she saw us.

She immediately stopped and looked at us with her face ashen. Li Gan also saw us and immediately rushed in front of Li Yan as if we were ferocious beasts ready to harm her. But then he realized that we could be even more dangerous than ferocious beasts. Li Gan's eyes were sharp and cold and his hands clenched into fists. Huo Qu Bing stopped looking so shocked and he pulled me behind him to shield me "Third brother Li, are you planning to get rid of the eyewitnesses?"

Li Yan laughed and walked out from behind Li Gan " Our fates are not what the General cares about, but the life of your precious son surely will be." I reply "I don't know why you are all acting so strange. When Qu Bing and I came over all we saw was your highness running over. Before we could greet you, we saw Lord Li running over." Li Yan smiled "I'm tired and best be off to rest."

As she walked past me, I said "I never intended to use this for anything, otherwise why wait until today. It's not out of fear, it's out of sympathy." Li Yan disappeared into the night, but her normally straight back appeared bowed, as if she couldn't stand the pressure. Li Gan coldly shot us a look before also departing.

Huo Qu Bing stared at me with a raised eyebrow and I make a surrender gesture and said I would tell him everything. I only tell him about Li Gan finding the handkerchief, me giving it to Li Yan, and the reason Li Gan tried to shoot me with an arrow many years ago. I don't say anything about me burning the first handkerchief and then handing a duplicate one to Li Yan later. It's not that I want to conceal this from him, I just don't know how to talk about that time without my feelings back then, and I worry how that would make him feel to hear it.

When I finish the story we walk back to our room. He didn't say anything and just laid there on the pallet watching me get ready for bed. Many times I want to say something but he doesn't respond. I finally fall silent, and the room descends into an oppressive silence. I look at the him

in the mirror and my hearts hurts more and more. I bite my lip and want to say something when he suddenly gets up and walks behind me. He sits down and picks up a brush and starts to brush my hair.

“Qu Bing, I.....”

“No need to explain. Those things you did for Meng Jie back then were not wrong, that is your personality. I like you because of who you are. I can only say that I am luckier than Meng Jiu, and in the future all of what you do will be for me.” He pulled me into his embrace and said all this softly.

Despite his tender and sincere tone, I can see his face in the mirror with a devilish glint in his eyes. I push him off me and hit him “You did it on purpose! You pretended to be upset, to care, all to scare me! You’re so petty!”

He laughed and easy dodged me. One hand grabbed my arm while the other snaked around my waist. The two of us fell on the rug “Back then you led me on a merry chase, scaring you a little right now is nothing compared to what you put me through.”

His laughter and mine fill the entire room.

.....

For the next two days, I am like a puppy following behind Huo Qu Bing. When it comes to hunting I’m as good as the men, maybe even better. But now is not the time for me to show my hunting prowess, I just need to show that I’m not a burden tagging along with Huo Qu Bing.

But I have a bad habit. When I see a prey, I always forget to use my bow and arrow. My instinct is to rush it and Huo Qu Bing almost laughs himself to death as he reminds me “Yu Er, you have a bow and arrow on your back you can use. Don’t be like a wolf rushing it with your claws and teeth.” I give him a sidelong glance and he quickly adds “Your claws and

teeth look is cute, I really like seeing it.”

Humph! His smiling is all lopsided, who would believe him! From across the mountain I hear loud yells of “A herd of deer!” I immediately clap and shout “Deer meat!” Huo Qu Bing rushed forward “What a great catch. Watch your hubby’s skill, I promise you’ll eat your fill tonight.”

It really was a herd of deer numbering in the thousands, all running through the mountains, the sunlight glistening off their horns. I look at the herd with confusion. Deer herds are never this big, so how did so many deer happen to gather together in one place?

I turn around and see Gong Xun Aou standing next to Huo Qu Bing. I don’t know what he said but Huo Qu Bing’s face turned dark and he looked furious. Gong Xun Aou nodded to me and then said “General wanted to keep this quiet. I only learned about it yesterday night when I heard the General’s personal servant discussing it. Now that you know, keep in under wraps for now and continue to enjoy the hunt.”

I ask “What’s going on?” Huo Qu Bing pointed an arrow towards the deer herd “Li Gan hit my uncle” and his arrow hit a deer directly in the neck. “What, he....” I don’t know what to say. How could Li Gan be so rash and strike Wei Qing?

Wei Qing is very special to Huo Qu Bing, who grew up without his father and back then Wei Qing didn’t have any children yet. The first time Huo Qu Bing got on a horse, Wei Qing put him on. The first time he held a bow and arrow, Wei Qing held his hands. The first story Qu Bing heard was his uncle’s battle against the Xiong Nu. Qu Bing’s lifelong dreams were cemented because of his adulation of his uncle. Even though now it appeared they are at political odds, but no one could take Wei Qing’s position in Huo Qu Bing’s heart. Li Gan hitting Wei Qing is worse than if he hit Huo Qu Bing directly.

“Didn’t you want to eat deer meat? Let’s hurry otherwise all the deer will have left.” Huo Qu Bing rushed towards the canyon and Gong Xun Aou followed. I can see him restraining his anger so I don’t want to discuss

it now and let it go, following them down into the canyon.

As I was running, the servant sent to assist us sprained his ankle. I stop to help, not wanting to leave him here since the deer herds could hurt him. Before I know it, Huo Qu Bing and Gong Xun Aou have disappeared. Clearly he's intending to work out his anger on the hunt. I tell the servant to stay put and rush into the canyon because the sound of the deer herds worries me. As I run in, I suddenly see a woman dressed exactly like me running through the trees. I'm taken aback but have no time to consider it before continuing forward.

The canyon roads get more and more narrow. I can hear the deer herds thundering through the canyon walls. I see Huo Qu Bing standing alone in the middle of the deer herd. Not far from him, Li Gan lays on the ground with an arrow protruding from his chest. A few dead deer are nearby.

Huo Qu Bing takes three arrows and fires them, all hitting a deer that is about to impale him. But behind the deer comes many more, all rushing forward in a stampede. The horns are razor sharp and can pierce Huo Qu Bing at anytime. He uses the dead deer carcasses to build a wall around him and Li Gan for the time being.

All the servants outside the canyon are screaming. Zhao Puo Nu wants to rush in many times but are always pushed back by the deer herd and can only shoot arrows in from outside. Liu Che appears and when he sees Huo Qu Bing's situation, he yells in rage "Why is no one going in to save him?" The servants reply "There are too many deer, and all are wild and vicious. The terrain is also very dangerous, both sides are sharp cliffs with only a narrow passage in the middle. The army cannot be used."

Liu Che suddenly snapped to focus and took off his jade and handed it to Gong Xun Aou "I order that the guards at the Gan Quan Palace be summoned to come here for a rescue operation." When Li Yan sees Huo Qu Bing and Li Gan in the center of the deer herd, her face turns white and she starts to shake. Liu Che hands fist into frustration as he paces back and forth "What happened? What happened to Li Gan?"

All of the servants say nothing, until one boldly answered “We do not know, at that time neither General had a servant with them.” Different than our expression of worry, Wei Kang (Wei Qing’s son) turns to look at Huo Qu Bing with hidden glee in his eyes.

All of Wei Qing’s followers have gradually deserted him, leaving only Ren An still loyal. He is now the Crown Prince’s tutor. I see him standing off to the side exchanging knowing glances with Wei Kang. Wei Qing finally arrives and hears what the servant said. His expression changes and he immediately looks at Wei Kang, Gong Xun Aou, and Ren An. Ren An and Gong Xun Aou lower their heads and refuse to meet Wei Qing’s eyes, while Wei Kang looks at his father with defiance.

I stand on a tree and look down, seeing that Qu Bing’s arrows are dwindling. Once he runs out, how can he face the thousands of angry deer with their sharp horns? I start to shake and my thundering heart feels like it’s about to jump out of my chest. Calm down, you must calm down, Jin Yu! If you want Qu Bing to live, you must calm down. I jump out of the tree and run towards Zhao Puo Nu,

Qu Bing has only three arrows left and he sends them flying. He immediately leaps over Li Gan and grabs Li Gan’s arrows. He turns and leaps back to his original spot and send three more arrows and three more deer falls. But one deer was right on top of him and it was too late to shoot an arrow at it. The deer’s sharp horn is aimed for his waist, plus more deer are coming towards him. He sends three more arrows flying and at the same time he grabbed a knife with his left hand and sliced the deer’s neck.

His movements were swift as lightning, and despite the life and death situation, his actions were incredible and breathtaking to behold. Liu Che, Wei Qing, and everyone watching couldn’t help but let out a complimentary whoop.

I pull Zhao Puo Nu aside “Can you please chase after Gong Xun He. After he passes the Emperor’s decree, I don’t need you to do anything other than to watch everything he does.” I don’t have time to explain so I tell him this plainly. His face changes and he immediately says “I will not fail you!”

His tone was that of an army subordinate receiving orders from a superior, telling me that he will fulfill this assignment with his life. I gratefully nod my head and he takes off.

I take cartons of arrows from a few servants and tied it around me. I climb towards a tree sticking out from a cliff side and then close my eyes before letting out a long wolf howl from deep inside my throat. With the howl, I release my hands and my body falls like a shooting star towards the center of the canyon. When the deer herd heard the wolf howl, they suddenly got frightened and their pattern became confused. The deer run into each other in the narrow canyon road.

I toss my gold ball sash around a tree branch and it slows my fall. I immediately release and repeat three more times, finally getting close to the ground. The last time I release, I look towards the ground for a place to land. Everyone holds their breaths and stares at me in mid-air. I have nowhere to turn and below me is a rampaging deer herd. The speed at which I am falling becomes faster and and it looks like I'm headed towards my demise.

I send my gold balls at three deer heads and all three fall one after another. The fallen deer help shield me from the rampaging herd, and I quickly hide behind them as I release another wolf howl to divert some of the oncoming deer.

Huo Qu Bing yelled "Jin Yu!" He was not happy to see me, and his voice showed his extreme rage and fear. I smile at him, trying to make my way towards him "Watch yourself. If I discover you got injured because you got distracted, I won't talk to you for an entire year."

The distance between us is so small, but today it takes us forever to get to each other. Every step is between hundreds of deer rushing past us. When I finally cross over the barrier of dead deer carcasses he constructed, both of us have tears in our eyes. No matter what happens next, no matter if we survive today, at least we're together now.

The moment I arrive is the moment he sends the last arrow flying. I

immediately toss the arrows behind me to him and he takes it and immediately sends more flying. I see the falling deer and my heart thunders as I think about what might have happened if I arrived even a few minutes later.

I'm not as good at archery as him so I let him take care of shooting the deer while I strengthen the barrier with even more deer carcasses. He was shooting his arrow and said "You idiotic woman!" Li Gan, who was laying on the ground not moving, coughed and said "This.....kind.....of idiotic.....is your happiness." I see Huo Qu Bing is bloody but doesn't have any injuries. I look at Li Gan and see that he's severely injured by the arrow and is covered with blood.

I put medicine on him but he gives a bittersweet smile "This is Huo Qu Bing's arrow prowess, so don't even bother. He didn't intend to kill me with one shot, but he also wasn't trying to be kind. If I was treated early I might be fine, but now.....it's too late."

I try to stop the bleeding "You have to live. Li Yan is outside and she looks like she might faint. If you died, then she will fall ill again." Li Gan's expression was hard to read, it was like a lifetime's happiness, sorrow, and joy was all flitting across his face.

"Qu Bing, you....why did you do it?" At this time, I don't want to call him foolish, but he was indeed foolish. If he wanted Li Gan dead, why use such a stupid tactic. Li Gan is a Duke of the Han court, every generation of the Li family has served the Emperor. By killing Li Gan this way, he can't avoid the death penalty either.

Qu Bing said nothing and just focused on killing the oncoming deer. Li Gan said "Don't blame him, we were both set up. I was not happy recently so told the servant to leave. I went alone to hunt. Suddenly a woman appeared and began to fight with me. She was vicious and every attack was meant to kill, leaving me no choice but to be deadly back. Seeing the way you are dressed today, I now understand....." He started coughing and couldn't finish.

I try to help him breath “I understand now. I saw a woman dressed exactly like me run past. During the deer rampage one already would be distracted. Plus Qu Bing was already angered earlier by what Gong Xun Aou said to him. So he shot you when he saw you attacking someone who he thought was me.”

Li Gan laughed “Gong Xun Aou told you I hit Wei Qing?” Qu Bing said nothing, so Li Gan continued “When I heard my father committed suicide, I was devastated. I went to find the Great General Wei to find out what really happened. Why he didn’t let my father face the enemy. I was prevented from seeing him, and the guards were rude and defamatory towards my father. I was so furious I began to fight with them, and when Wei Qing arrived and tried to break it up, I inadvertently pushed him. When he asked why I was fighting, I couldn’t explain without repeating all the horrible things they said about my father. The two servants made it seem like I started the fight.”

I coldly say “This happened over six months ago, and Gong Xun Aou picks today to tell Qu Bing.” Li Gan starts to violently cough up blood. He grabbed my hand “Ms. Jin Yu, I beg.....beg of you.....”

A life was disappearing before my eyes and I can see his anguish and longing. I suddenly realize that all the fighting wasn’t worth it and I say “I don’t know if I can do it, but I promise I will endure Li Yan as much as I can, and will ask Qu Bing not to harm her.”

Li Gan took a few deep breaths, his eyes filled with gratitude. His face was completely white but he looked peaceful. Seeing him at peace, my last doubts went away and I do not regret making this promise to him. He closed his eyes with a slight smile on his face. His hand was still twitching, wanting to finish one more thing. After moments, his hand fell still and his lingering smile was tinged with impossible sadness. I lift his hand and I can see he was trying to write the character for “Li” with his blood.

I am not someone who is sentimental, but seeing this “Li” character, I remember the first time I met him. The drinking, eating, and making merry. My heart ached and I cut the sleeve with the character off and put it in my

robe.

From a distance Zhao Puo Nu and some other generals have arrived and are heading towards us and helping to kill the rampaging deer. Huo Qu Bing tossed his bow now that all the arrows are used up and uses his knife to slice his way out. "He's dead" I say to Qu Bing as I walk up to him and also use my gold balls to strike a deer coming towards me. "With Li Gan dead, there is no corroboration for the set up. But there are still clues, like this suspicious deer herd. I don't know how they got so many deer in one place, but if I have time I can figure it out."

Huo Qu Bing held my hand and looked at the distance towards the rescuers "I want you to forget what you heard from Li Gan." His hands are cold, making my hands cold. My tears come but I force it away "I will!" Zhao Puo Nu arrived and kneeled down towards Huo Qu Bing but turned his face towards me "I did not fail you!"

Zhao Puo Nu saw the dead Li Gan and his face changed color. The other generals asked if the Duke was dead? Huo Qu Bing casually said "Bring Li Gan's body" and then he walked forward. Zhao Puo Nu bowed to me "If I was faster to arrive, maybe the Duke could have been saved." I shook my head and silently followed behind Huo Qu Bing.

Liu Che was overjoyed when he saw Huo Qu Bing, but it vanished in an instant. Li Gan's body was presented and Li Yan promptly fainted. She was immediately taken back to Gan Quan Palace. Liu Che looked at Li Gan's body, then gave a cold stare at Huo Qu Bing before waving everyone aside. All the servants and lower officials immediately scurried away. A servant wanted me to leave but I refused to move. The normally silent Wei Qing said "Let her stay!" In a few moments, the only people left are Wei Qing, Gong Xun Aou, Gong Xun He and other such high officials.

Liu Che coldly said "Give me a reason. Killing an high official is a capital offense!" Huo Qu Bing walked up and knelt before Liu Che and said nothing at all. Liu Che's face turned green and Gong Xun Aou knelt down and put the blame on himself for telling Qu Bing about how Li Gan struck Wei Bing a few months ago after Li Guang committed suicide. Liu

Che was so angry he kicked Gong Xun Aou “Don’t you know Qu Bing’s temper?”

Gong Xun Aou kept bowing his head and saying that he deserved to die..... In a few moments, Gong Xin Aou’s head is all bloodied from the bowing. Wei Qing looked torn. Many years ago Gong Xun Aou saved his life and he has always been grateful. Wei Qing knelt down in front of Liu Che and bowed “One is my nephew, the other my subordinate. Li Gan’s death, I must also take responsibility. Please punish me.”

Liu Che ignored Wei Qing and pointed at Huo Qu Bing “Seeing you commanding an army, I thought you matured. I thought having a wife and a son you would restrain your temper. But look what happened today! Tell me the truth, what did Li Gan do?”

Huo Qu Bing’s body was ramrod straight but the coldness seeped into his heart. He used his fierce exterior to hide his inner pain. The people he considered his family since childhood finally decided to take him out as well. I can tell Liu Che is also suspicious and wants to give Huo Qu Bing an out. But Huo Qu Bing won’t throw all the blame on a dead person and smear Li Gan’s good name after his death. He also can’t tell the truth, because it might endanger Wei Qing. Doesn’t matter if Wei Qing knew or not, Liu Che would use this prime opportunity to take out Wei Qing. And since Wei Qing is the Wei family’s strongest support, once he’s taken out, the entire family would collapse.

Liu Che waited but still Huo Qu Bing said nothing. He raged “Do you think I won’t kill you?” He pointed at me “Jin Yu, come here!” I walked up and knelt down next to Qu Bing. His body shook slightly but his eyes were still trained on the ground. Liu Che said “Seeing Jin Yu’s actions today, even though I do not favor her, I cannot help but be impressed. This woman has the courage to do anything for you. Do you want to make her a widow?”

Huo Qu Bing’s hands fisted so tightly the veins all popped out. He had grabbed a rock next to him and was tightly clenching it, so much that blood was seeping out from his hands. Liu Che coldly asked “Or let Jin Yu

accompany you into the grave?”

I took Qu Bing's hand and opened it, removing the jagged rock pieces and cleaning it up. I said "The other hand" and he handed it me. I clean the rocks from that hand and use a handkerchief to wipe the blood away. "All done" and then I hold his hand. He didn't push me away, like a piece of wood, he didn't even react. I stubbornly hold his hand and stare at him without blinking. After some time, he turned to look at me and I smiled at him. His eyes showed only warmth and apology, but the pain and coldness from earlier went away. He grasped my hand back.

The two of us were acting like we were alone so everyone just stared at us with shock. Liu Che coldly laughed "Jin Yu, it's probably pointless to ask you if you are willing to die, no?" I respectfully bow my head, grateful to Liu Che. Not sure if he was loathe to part with talent, or he was suspicious of the circumstances of everything that just happened, but he kept trying to give Qu Bing a chance. He was even using my life as a threat to get Qu Bing to open his mouth and tell the truth. "Your majesty, I am willing to be together with the General."

Liu Che silently paced, stuck between the law and his legacy on one hand, and the life of Huo Qu Bing on another. After some time, he wearily asked "I heard people were trampled to death today in the deer rampage?" A few servants answered "Yes, a total of eight servants were trampled....." One of the names listed was the servant who "sprained his ankle" to delay me. I look at Ren An, Wei Kang, Gong Xun Aou.....they are sure thorough.

When Liu Che heard it all, he nodded and looked at the sky, talking to himself "Li Gan fell into a deer rampage and was sadly trampled to dead. Give him a state burial!"

Everyone gaped in shock. Zhao Puo Nu and his group knelt immediately "Thank you, your majesty!" Everyone then reacted and all shouted "Thank you, your majesty!" Some stared in rage and envy at Huo Qu Bing. But under Liu Che's cold piercing gaze, soon everyone lowered their heads and all knelt down.

Since Huo Qu Bing told me to forget what Li Gan said, I was already accepting of the judgment to come. Suddenly my heart was tumbling and this was the first time I genuinely bow my head to Liu Che while calling out “Thank you, your majesty!”

Liu Che glanced at the still kneeling Huo Qu Bing, his eyes still full of anger, then turning and leaving “Humph! Thank you? If you guys want to thank me and are grateful, then stop creating messes for me.”

Chapter 37: Chance Encounter

A hunting trip organized as a relaxing event concludes in the most devastating of ways. The Duke Li Gan was killed by rampaging deer, and Consort Li was so frightened by what happened she collapsed. Liu Che had no desire to continue and ordered everyone to depart Gan Quan Palace and return to Chang An.

Huo Qu Bing became unusually quiet, sometimes saying not a word for an entire day.

Blood is thick with affection, and is something I value greatly and he's always had his entire life. But it is weak when stacked against power and the throne. I don't know how to console and counsel him, so I just quietly stay by his side. I hope that when he turns around and sees me nearby, he'll know that he's not alone.

Spring quietly arrived in Chang An and before anyone realized it, all the flowers had bloomed and Spring was perfuming the air. I strolled with Qu Bing in the peach blossom trees, and he plucked a peach blossom to tuck in my hair. He whispered in my ear "Want to go see our son?" I startle and ask "Not the one in the Palace?" He lightly nodded his head.

This matter can never be revealed. It concerns not just our lives, but Jiu Ye's and the people close to him. So Huo Qu Bing and I have a silent understanding to never discuss it. But how could we not miss our son? We are just too afraid to think about him. I embrace Qu Bing and with my face buried in his chest, I say a muffled "Yes."

He laughed and tweaked my nose "Oh! Oh! Look at this! We haven't even said our vows and you're already embracing me in public. Don't worry, even if you don't seduce me, I'll do my best." I was angry and embarrassed so I turn and leave. He started laughing behind me and I feel this sense of happiness despite my outwardly angry expression. He's slowly turning back to his old self.

After dinner, Qu Bing summoned Huo Guang to the study and they conversed for a long time. After leaving, Huo Guang had a very determined look on his face, almost like he grew up in a matter of hours.

“Did you encourage Guang to leave Chang An and go home?” “No! Every man must pick their own path in life, and have their own dreams. He decides his own life. I merely told him exactly what the political situation in Chang An is like today. I told him I might not be able to protect him in the future, and he might even face trouble because of me.”

Seeing Huo Guang’s expression, I knew what he had decided “So Guang still wants to stay in Chang An?” Qu Bing smiled and nodded, looking pleased and proud of Huo Guang’s conviction.

In this March Spring time, the peach blossoms are blooming wildly but it turns out the political battles in court are even more eye catching than the most vibrant of flowers. Li Gan’s burial, Huo Qu Bing did not attend, while Wei Qing and Gong Xun Aou and those folks went to pay their respects. Princess Pingyang plays matchmaker for Li Gan’s two daughters. Liu Che feels sorry towards Li Gan, and also wants to keep splitting up Huo Qu Bing and Wei Qing, so he has Li Gan’s two young daughters named as consorts for the Crown Prince.

Despite all the men folk dying in succession in the Li family, leaving only women and children, the family has been powerful since the Qin dynasty. They still have supporters in court and in the populace. Li Gan’s nephew Li Ling, despite being young, has already demonstrated astounding military potential. He gains Liu Che’s notice, and Liu Che intends to make him a Imperial guard. Huo Qu Bing was eighteen when he got that title, which means Li Ling is already looked upon to be the next great general.

The Wei family’s gesture in this case pulls the Li supporters toward them for showing kindness to the remaining Li family members. It also draws a clear and obvious line between the Wei family and Huo Qu Bing, who everyone knows shot Li Gan.

Huo Qu Bing shooting Li Gan continues to be discussed and more and

more people support the Li family. In the past they all opposed Wei Qing, but now they find Wei Qing's courteous exterior more palatable than the coldness of Huo Qu Bing. On the surface it looks like the Wei family is opposing Huo Qu Bing and trying to take care of the remaining Li family members, so everyone starts to like the Wei family again and turn their frustrations to Huo Qu Bing.

Despite Liu Che protecting Huo Qu Bing, the appeals contain to pour in from ministers begging the Emperor to follow the law and not let Huo Qu Bing off. Liu Che has no choice but to send Huo Qu Bing away to the border city of Xu Fang under the pretense of guarding the city, to let things cool down in Chang An.

That day, there were only few people present when Liu Che was questioning Huo Qu Bing, and all information was supposedly sealed. So how did it spread until the entire court knew about it? Why are there so many people daring to directly oppose Huo Qu Bing at this time, especially knowing Liu Che is favoring Huo Qu Bing?

Huo Qu Bing continues to ignore the ripples in court and does whatever he pleases. He appeared to be encouraging those who oppose him rather than trying to placate them, letting matters grow to a frenzied state. Before he leaves for Xu Fang, Huo Qu Bing makes his first official request in court, to the shock of everyone. He asks that the three princes, with Liu Bo as the oldest, be made Infante Dukes.

When a prince is made an Infante Duke, he must leave Chang An and go to his newly designed territory. On the surface he gets to rule over his own territory, but in reality it's to take the princes out of Chang An so they cannot vie for the throne with the Crown Prince. Huo Qu Bing's actions cause massive ripples in court from both factions, while Liu Che does not agree or disagree with Huo Qu Bing's request at that time, leaving everyone even more nervous. A few days later, some of the pro-Wei family high ministers all submit their requests, backing Huo Qu Bing. Liu Che still does nothing.

Days later, the same high ministers, now with even more new

supporters, continue to inundate Liu Che with requests to grant Huo Qu Bing's proposal. Still Liu Che makes no move. Huo Qu Bing stands to the side and watches all of this unfold. He can see this matter is heading towards success, but he appears even more concerned "How did my uncle let things get this way. He probably can't control people eager to make a name for themselves. The pressure is so great now that even if the Emperor agrees, he will grow wary of the strength of the Wei family supporters."

I reply "The Wei family was propped up by the Emperor initially, and now he can't even control them. It's no surprise the Great General Wei also can't control them. The Empress, Princess Pingyang, the Crown prince, generals, dukes, there are so many people who gain from this family. Their power is so great now there is bound to be internal strife. Compared to the mess of the Wang family and the Bao family years ago, the Great General Wei is already doing a good job keeping control."

Qu Bing laughed sadly "Yup! Everyone has their own greed and wants. I'm a perfect example. Even knowing the Emperor will be wary of the Crown Prince if his backers and support grows too quickly and too strong, so I don't want that to happen so I bring up the other princes in order to oppose him. The Emperor knows that I've placed him in a difficult position."

Everyone in court waits for the final decision, this matter having become a taut bow. If Liu Che doesn't agree, then the future of the political tide in court will be dangerous indeed. I think that right now, there are very few royals and nobles who are resting easy in Chang An. The unusual activity at the brothels and dancing houses reflect the people meeting to discuss what to do.

It is during this critical time that Consort Li suddenly asks to see me. It's so unexpected that I tried to figure out what she wants. Huo Qu Bing looks at the summons and tells me "Nothing to come of it, just feign illness and decline, I'll cover for you." I think about it some more "I hear she's been sick lately, I want to see her. If I hear what she has to say, it'll give us a better understanding of what the enemy is thinking."

Huo Qu Bing must think it's not necessary, but he doesn't object. "Whatever you want. Since I was planning to see the Empress, let's visit the Palace together then."

Before I arrive I can already smell the thick scent of medicinal herbs. Within the curtains I hear Li Yan ordering a maid "Tell Jin Yu to come in." The maid look uncertain but she opened the curtains and let me in. Li Yan's face was almost completely white, but her cheeks were unusually red. I don't know medicine, but I can tell she's very very sick. She smiled and pointed to her pallet "You sit closer, I don't have the energy to talk too loudly."

Her smile was different than usual, it was like when we first knew each other. It was peaceful and kind, without any distance or wariness. I sit down next to her and she smiles at me for some time before saying "You are still so beautiful and healthy. Still blooming, but I'm already wilted."

I assure her "Don't say these negative things. There are many doctors in the Palace. If empty your heart of worries, you can recover soon." She smiled wanly "I know my own body. I don't have much time left. Every step I have been plotting, fighting and scheming, in the end losing more than I have gained. Jin Yu, do you still hate me?"

The memories of long ago flashed through my mind: that masked face, the girl with the bright and intelligent eyes, the face that could topple an empire, the girl with a heart full of troubles, the one who taught me how to play the flute, the girl laughing under the lamplight.....

I shook my head "I don't want to hate. I learned a lesson these last few years. Hate will destroy a person long before it destroys the opponent. I want to forget and let it go. I want to only remember the happiness in my life, and put the unhappiness behind me. I want to keep walking forward. A person's life is but a few short decades. Even if we rush it along, there are many interesting things to watch, see, and do. If we have the energy to hate, why not use it to appreciate the existing happiness."

She turned and coughed. I quickly handed her a handkerchief, and

when she tossed it aside, I saw it was stained red with blood. My heart fell but she didn't seem to mind "Xiao Yu, you were lucky in life so you can say this. There are some hate in this world that cannot be forgotten. For example, if someone hurt Huo Qu Bing, can you forgive? Can you forget? Can you let it go? You will surely give your life to seek revenge."

Before I could answer she waved her hand "There is no need to debate this. Today I asked you here to beg you for one more favor and to ask you one question."

"Tell me. If I can do it, I will try my best."

"Xiao Yu, my heart is dead, I no longer care about anything else. But I cannot stop worrying about the people I've dragged into my own vengeance. I'm not worried about Bu Er, as long as the Emperor agrees with Huo Qu Bing and sends him away to be an Infante Duke, then he will leave Chang An and be safe. I worry my brothers cannot avoid it, especially my second brother. His desire for power grows stronger every day."

"I know what you mean. But Li Yan, you know that Li Guang Li chooses his own path in life. If he doesn't control himself, he'll be in trouble sooner rather than later. As for Qu Bing, don't worry. I think.....I think if the Emperor agrees with his proposal, that is probably the final thing Qu Bing will ever do for the Wei family."

Li Yan didn't understand my meaning "Last thing?" She saw I wasn't going to explain so she smiled and didn't push further. "I will continue to warn my second brother, and it's up to him if he wants to heed my warnings. The Emperor will miss me and I hope he will be lenient towards my second brother. The rest is up to the Heavens."

Li Yan silently stared at the incense burning and didn't say anything for a long time. I was also silent, waiting for her question. "Li.....Li Gan. What did he say before he died?"

This was one of the two things Li Gan wanted before he died, I believe he must be resting in peace now once he knows she asked about him. I sigh and take out the bloody cloth from my robe and pass it to Li Yan. She stared at it, her eyes starting to mist with tears. Finally one tear after another falls, almost like pearls as it hits the cloth.

She bit her finger and used her blood to finish the “Li” character. One blood was long dried and black, the other was still bright red. The black and red created a contrast that made it appear that their lives were destined to be fated but never reach a resolution. She looked at the cloth for awhile longer before handing it back to me “I have one more favor to ask of you. Please burn this in front of Li Gan’s grave.” I nod.

She smiled and grabbed my hand. I grab her hand back. She gave me a brilliant smile, as beautiful as a flower. It was like when we first became friends “Xiao Yu, you can go now! I will beg the Emperor to return Tan Er to you. But with General Huo’s current position.....the Emperor will likely not agree. I pray you don’t hate me. If there was one day when the Han army is outside the gates of Luo Lan, I pray you can remember our friendship when we first met and beg General Huo to spare the common people and restrain his soldiers from killing more.”

I help her fix her hair and help her lay back down on the pallet “Your illness is from worrying too much. Stop worrying now. If that day arrives, I will do my best. Don’t forget that Xi Yu is also partially my homeland.”

She closed her eyes and her voice was tiny, almost like she was talking to herself “I’m tired, I’m so tired. Soon I will be able to rest at last. When my mother sees me, will she berate me? I tried my best. I wonder if she saw my father. I want to listen to the herding songs by the banks of the Kong Que River. The most expensive wine is not as delicious as the water from the Kong Que River. Actually all I ever wanted is to dance around a fire at night out in the plains, to go herding with the man I love, to give birth to a brood of children so my body loses its shape, to have coarse hands from plucking lambswool to make a cloth.....”

I lightly rise and walk outside.

Many of the maids are outside so inside her room is just Li Yan. She has been and always will be lonely in her entire life. I always wanted to ask her if she regretted entering the Palace? But now all our debt and vengeance is at an end. I hope that she departs this world peacefully. For her, she really did more than a woman could possibly imagine. If all the Luo Lan girls were like her, then Liu Che wanting to conquer Xi Yu would be facing depleting his treasury and a heavy loss of life.

I tell the maids to go back in. As I'm leaving, her personal maid stops me "Ms. Jin Yu, can you please counsel her highness to please see the Emperor." I looked confused so she explained "Since her highness got sick, she has refused to see the Emperor. Every time he visits, she will only see him through a curtain. The Emperor is furious, but every time he wants to barge in, he worries about her illness getting worse."

I think and look towards her room. Li Yan, are you doing this so that you can carve yourself even deeper in Liu Che's heart? What can't an Emperor possess in this world? But he is about to lose you, when you are at your most beautiful, when he longs to see you one more time.

I bow to the maid "I cannot help" and then quickly leave. In the carriage, Qu Bing watches my silence and doesn't disturb me. He lets me zone out and then I suddenly say "The Emperor is about to agree to let the princes be Infante Dukes."

Qu Bing raised an eyebrow "Consort Li is giving up so easily?" He then realized "Her body is in that bad a shape?"

"Yes, she's always been weak, but now her heart is dead as well. To protect her son, she will use her dying breath to get the Emperor to agree to the Infante Dukes. With the Crown Prince supporters begging the Emperor, plus adding Li Yan, he will agree."

Qu Bing didn't look happy and instead sighed. He pulled me into his embrace and I tightly hugged him back. I suddenly remember that I didn't answer Li Yan's question, but I do know the answer and she does as well. I tighten my arms around him "Qu Bing!"

“Yes?” “You have to be with me forever!”

Qu Bing’s arms also tightened around me and he vowed “I will!”

When the peach blossoms fell, it danced in the wind and blanketing the entire ground in red. With a thousand emotions, an beauty who shook an empire was like the flowers, also falling and disappearing in the wind.

On Li Yan’s last day, the Emperor finally agreed to make the princes Infante Dukes. Li Yan passed with a smile on her face,

Li Yan, she left a legend for the ages about her beauty. She left a legend about a poor girl who became the Emperor’s most beloved concubine. But her true background, her struggles and her heartache, it disappeared without a trace in this world. And me, the only person who knows her secret, I bury it deep within my heart for all of eternity.

.....

Huo Qu Bing takes me away from Chang An and we head towards Xu Fang. Before we left, he asks to take Tan Er with us, but the Emperor says Tan Er is sickly and the weather is cold in Xu Fang so doesn’t let him go.

Zhao Puo Nu tells me that Wei Kang, Wei Qing’s son, asked the Emperor to join Huo Qu Bing on this outing and the Emperor agreed. None of us understand what Wei Kang is planning. I don’t want to think about the unpleasantness, only anxious to leave Chang An and see my son soon. I remember his birth and how quickly he was taken from me, and my heart hurts. It also hurts because I know that seeing my son means seeing Jiu Ye again soon. It has been almost a year since I saw him. Is he well?

Despite Qu Bing’s foray being called “protecting the city”, but Xu Fang is well guarded and with the Xiong Nu out of the Desert South region, it in truth needs no protecting. So this trip out West, Huo Qu Bing is very carefree and leisurely. If he sees something I’m interested in, he stops and lets me explore before continuing. In truth I’m very anxious but I don’t

want to reveal it so I try my best to be normal not to arouse the suspicions of others.

Wei Kang has his father's adherence to rules and structure, but lacks Wei Qing's ability to accept others. He instead has the brash arrogance of the young nobles. He sees Huo Qu Bing's casual behavior and is very upset. Every time Huo Qu Bing wants to stop for a day or so, he objects. Huo Qu Bing completely ignores him and Wei Kang looks more and more pissed. He realizes that no matter what he says it doesn't matter so he shuts up. But he shoots more and more dirty and hateful looks at Huo Qu Bing behind his back.

Stopping and playing along the way, we finally arrive at Xu Fang. After Huo Qu Bing settles everything, he takes me out to play some more. With Xu Fang filled with Wei Qing subordinates, Wei Kang is even more aggressive when he arrives at the city. But since there is nothing to do, he doesn't have any opportunity to find conflict with Huo Qu Bing.

The temperature differential in the desert is so vast that the days are hot enough to boil a person but once the sun sets it's immediately cold. Huo Qu Bing and I often ride horses and roam the desert all night long. Sometimes I think that we can live here in Xu Fang forever and never step foot back in Chang An., But I know that wish is impossible. As the Wei family faction grows stronger with those supporting the Crown Prince, Huo Qu Bing is the only one who can temper Wei Qing's power in the army. For that reason alone, the Emperor will never let Huo Qu Bing go. And if the Emperor doesn't let him go, then it places Huo Qu Bing in ever greater danger as he opposes a powerful faction.

Huo Qu Bing takes me to places we've been before. From a distance I can see Ming Sa Mountains. With a round moon perched in the sky shining over the entire desert, my heart leapt and I raised my head for a long howl. I immediately jump off the horse and start running towards the Yue Ya Spring. In Chang An I can never behave this way. I finally feel like I've left Chang An behind.

Huo Qu Bing sees that my happiness differs from my pretend act

during the trip out to Xu Fang and he starts laughing out loud. “Yu Er, do you know what the biggest regret in my life is?” I take off my shoes and dip my toes in the water. I think and say “Having an opportunity to fight Yi Zhi Xie directly? Allowing Wei Qing to confront the Shan Yu’s forces face on and not you?”

He took off his shoes and also put his foot in the water “Success in battle does not depend on one person’s will and courage, but requires the will and coordination of many people. My uncle faced the Shan Yu, I faced the Left Sage King. Who defeats the Shan Yu is not what is important, the importance is we cooperated to bring victory.”

“Li Gan’s death?” He shook his head “If it wasn’t me, he still can’t avoid his fate. A man must be willing to accept the consequences for his actions and I was the one who shot him, despite the reasons. I may feel sorrow but there is nothing to regret.”

I kick the water and laugh “Nothing is right, then I’m not going to guess anymore.” He was silent for a few moments and then stared at the water “My biggest regret was years ago, the moment we said our farewells at the Yue Ya Spring. I knew you were coming to Chang An, but I never told you who I really was.”

I was playing with the water but when I heard what he said, my expression froze but I continued to play with the water. My initial cheerfulness dampened. In truth, at this Yue Ya Spring, the first person I met, the first person I said goodbye to.....wasn’t him.

We both stopped talking and my hands playing with the water became the only sound in the desert. Huo Qu Bing used his toes to tickle the bottom of my foot. I’m ticklish there so I try to avoid him but he’s agile and I can’t find a way out. As our feet are tussling, my awkwardness goes away and I laugh “If you keep picking on me, I’ll retaliate.” I scoop up water with my hands and splash it on his face.

He splashed me back with a devilish grin on his face, and in seconds we are both drenched. I holler “We’re all wet! How are we going to head

back, we'll get sand all over us?" He laughed and jumped in the water "Since we're wet, let's not go back. We can spend the night here and dry our clothes in the sun tomorrow before heading back." He took off his robe and tossed it to the side before giving me a knowing look.

I huff at him "You planned this!" He smiled and pulled me "Such a glorious place. If we don't enjoy it fully, wouldn't that be a waste?"

I act mad and refuse to get in the water. He happily pulls me while tickling my feet still. I try to duck but finally give in to his playfulness and jump in the water. He pulled me towards the center of the spring when I suddenly make a halt gesture to him. He stopped and then craned his ears to listen,

It's the sound of a flute, coming from far away. But the sound was growing louder so it meant the person playing the flute was coming towards the Yue Ya Spring. In moments Huo Qu Bing has also heard it. He said in frustration "There are clearly lunatics in Xi Yu. Instead of staying at home in the middle of the night, this crazy person is out roaming the desert playing the flute."

I laugh "The people of the Han dynasty or the Xiong Nu who have committed an offense often run to Xi Yu to get away. It's a place full of random people from all over, so clearly Xi Yu has its share of lunatics." I swim towards the shore and Huo Qu Bing follows me while still grumbling.

The sound of the flute changed suddenly, from joy to sorrow. It was like a person who was remembering a joyful memory suddenly realizing it's all gone, and the transition from joy to sorrow was instantaneous. I realize how talented the flute playing was and I'm touched by the sadness of the tune. I crane my neck towards the direction of the music.

A round bright moon was overhead and a snow white camel was running on the sand. Its footsteps don't even kick up any dust and its endurance can rival any prized stallion. It appeared to be the famed Sky Mountain Snow Camel that is prized as much as the legendary Blood

Sweat Horse.

A person wearing all white was riding on the camel and playing the flute. His dark hair was billowing in the wind and his wide robes were dancing with the movement of the camel. Such a bold stance instead looked very elegant on him. The moonlight enveloped him but couldn't take away his loneliness and sorrow. His flute appeared to suck the entire vast expanse of the desert into his sadness.

Huo Qu Bing complimented him "Yu Er, he's not even riding the camel properly, he's letting it run at will. He resembles the famed scholar Lao Zhi riding his donkey and traveling wherever the donkey takes him. But Lao Zi stayed within the Han borders, but he's so bold that he treats the desert like his backyard to roam as he wishes."

As the figure gets closer and closer, my suspicions are confirmed and I quickly turn my head and try to climb out of the water. The camel stopped at the edge of the Yue Ya Spring and Jiu Ye held his flute and stared at the water and the mountains. His face showed his longing and his isolation. It seemed like him and his reflection are the only companions in this vast expanse.

He raised his head and looked towards the mountain, as if remembering something. He suddenly smiled, but it was immediately replaced with a look of loss. I hide in the shadows of the mountains and shrink into the water. In two short steps I would be onshore, but my body cannot move. Huo Qu Bing silently stands beside me. In the silence I can hear a heart pounding, not sure if its him or me.

The camel snorted and kicked up the robe on the ground, then braying in our direction. Jiu Ye's hand immediately reached for his bow and arrow and he smiles in our direction "May I ask which lofty personage is over there?"

I'm still unable to face him, but Huo Qu Bing cannot endure any longer and he walks out with a smile "Brother Meng, its just us, a married couple who was seeking you. Who knew we would be fated to run into

each other tonight.” I can only quietly walk out beside Huo Qu Bing.

Jiu Ye saw Huo Qu Bing’s naked torso and his face immediately turned ashen. He momentarily was so stunned he didn’t move his bow and arrow directed towards us. His eyes glanced over me and quickly averted and pulled out a robe from his bag on the camel.

Huo Qu Bing was about to decline when he realized what it was for and he turned to look at me. My clothes were plastered on my body from the water. Huo Qu Bing reluctantly took the robe with a “thank you” and draped it over me. Jiu Ye lowered his bow and arrow and with a sad smile said “Last time, I also pointed that bow and arrow at you.” Huo Qu Bing turned to look at me but I just lowered my head and didn’t respond.

The three of us were so silent it was suffocating so I break the silence “Jiu Ye, we are here to see.....the baby.” The baby is over a year old now and still we haven’t named him. Jiu Ye smiled, this time with warmth, and replied “Without your permission, I’ve given him a nickname. The single character of “Yi” (means lightness). We all call him Yi Er.”

Huo Qu Bing said “The character of “Yi”, it can hide and evade, can also mean excellence. This name is very good. Let his real name be Yi as well. From now on, his name is Huo Yi.”

It was impossible to thank Jiu Ye for what he did for us. Huo Qu Bing never said thank you to Jiu Ye, but by using the name Jiu Ye gave our son as his real name, it expressed his gratitude to Jiu Ye.

[A son’s name is paramount and can only be given by a male elder of the family. For Huo Qu Bing to allow Jiu Ye to name his son is an unparalleled acceptance of Jiu Ye’s importance in the life of his son.]

Jiu Ye looked towards me, as if he didn’t even hear what Qu Bing said, only waiting for what I wanted. I replied “I really like this name.” He smiled and didn’t mention the name anymore “I’ve asked for Yi Er to be brought from the Sky Mountains here. Do you want to see him?”

Huo Qu Bing and I exchanged a look and our hearts were thundering. Huo Qu Bing continued “The trip back and forth will take until the end of the day tomorrow. We’ll be delayed for too long. Yu Er, can you endure it for a bit longer. Other things can be messed up, but with this matter I don’t want to have a single thing go wrong.”

So close and yet I can’t see him yet. I force a smile and nod my head “I understand. One year I’ve waited, a few more days I can endure.” Jiu Ye and Huo Qu Bing exchanged a look and Qu Bing said “Yu Er, I promise you, you will be reunited with Yi Er soon.”

Jiu Ye smiled wanly, but his loneliness in his eyes grew deeper. He glanced over and then turned the camel to leave. “Then I will wait for your message.” Huo Qu Bing hurriedly asked “How can I find you when I reach Ha Mi?”

The Sky Mountain Snow Camel moved like the wind, in seconds Jiu Ye was far away. His voice travels back “When you enter the city, Yu Er will be able to find me.”

Huo Qu Bing turned to look at me but didn’t press further. These two men, whenever they see each other, it was like two martial arts experts sparring. The pain they inflict is impossible to see and I can only carefully duck here and there. But I can’t help but be affected by their intense auras.

I actually have no clue why Jiu Ye said that I would be able to find him when I entered the city, so I can’t explain even if Huo Qu Bing asked me. I can only smile and think about it while trying to change the subject. Then I actually chanced upon a genuine question “How did you know Jiu Ye was currently in Ha Mi?” Huo Qu Bing startled and then looked elsewhere “The closest large city from here is Ha Mi, so I guessed he was there.”

“Isn’t Ge Er Mu also very large?”

“Yu Er, when you see Yi Er, what do you want to do the most?” Huo

Qu Bing didn't answer my question and instead asked me one. He used something I've been thinking about for such a long time to divert my attention. I had my suspicions, but I figure he had a reason for not telling me the truth. I don't press any further and instead answer his question.

Chapter 38: Carefree

Huo Qu Bing was full speed ahead when it comes to war, but when it comes to seeing Yi Er, he's constantly worried. He's always fretting about something going wrong. Every time I ask, he goes through a list of possible dangers lurking. I see he's overly cautious and even unusually pessimistic, but seeing that he's just as eager for any information about our son, I control myself from pressuring him so that he can prepare everything.

As we wait and wait, what arrived first was Wei Kang getting into an incident.

According to the scouts, around the Ah Ke Sai area near Xu Fang there are random pockets of lingering Xiong Nu forces. Huo Qu Bing doesn't want to bother with them since these stragglers can't even be considered a Xiong Nu army. They are people who escaped from the battlefield or those who have broken army protocol, afraid to return to the Xiong Nu for fear of punishment. He considers them no more than thieves and outlaws, and capturing them is the job of the local law enforcement in the Xi Yu kingdoms. He also doesn't need or want to be dragged into capturing thieves and outlaws.

Wei Kang doesn't agree and argues with Huo Qu Bing about it. Everyone in the army feels torn, one is the son of the Great General Wei Qing and is close to the Crown Prince and is even Huo Qu Bing's cousin; the other is the Biao Qi General Huo Qu Bing who is currently prized by the Emperor. No one, not even Zhao Puo Nu, wants to get involved with this fight between two cousins who could easily make up tomorrow.

Huo Qu Bing endures until finally he loses patience and coldly says "I'm the commander so there is no place for you to second guess me. When you have the ability to lead your own army, then I will listen to your orders." Wei Kang can't say anything, he just gives Huo Qu Bing a hateful glare and mutters under his breath "The last name is not Wei, no wonder not aligned with us. My father raised a wolf in the midst."

Huo Qu Bing glared at Wei Kang and says nothing. I sigh, Wei Kang would already be dead if his last name wasn't Wei. Suddenly Wei Kang laughs and bows to Huo Qu Bing "General, please excuse me" and then he leaves. His last smile leaves me shaken, I have this really odd feeling.

I thought this matter was over when suddenly we find out Wei Kang disobeyed orders and attacked the Xiong Nu In Ah Ke Sai at night. When Huo Qu Bing finds out it's already the next day. He's furious "When Wei Kang returns, I will send his ass packing for Chang An immediately."

I share a sad smile with Zhao Puo Nu "Only if he comes back alive. The area around Ah Ke Sai is a rocky sharp cliff region created by thousands of years of wind blowing through the deserts. It's a veritable maze, and at night the winds are like demons howling. The locals call it the Demon Region, and smart thieves try to lure their prey into that area so they are easy targets."

Huo Qu Bing may be raging but he still have to go save Wei Kang. I want to go but he won't let me "I've been in and out of army bases with tens of thousands of Xiong Nu, you can't be worried that a few hundred thieves can harm me? I'll go with Zhao Puo No, there is no one I trust more beside me from this army base. You stay here for me to guard the base."

He's firm and has a valid reason so I agree "No matter if you rescue him, you have to get out of there before sundown." He smiled and nodded. As he got on his horse to leave, he suddenly stared at me and then leaped off the horse and kissed me on the forehead in front of all the soldiers "We'll see Yi Er very soon."

"What?" I forget my embarrassment and ask. His horse had already flown forward like the wind and all I see is the trail of dust kicked up by hundreds of soldiers following him.

From morning until noon, from afternoon under dusk, I start to get more and more worried. I pace in circles in the room, until finally I can't take it anymore and rush out and jump on a horse. Before I set off, I hear horses coming towards the base.

I rush to meet them “Is Wei Kang fine?” Zhao Puo Nu’s face was all white, and behind him was Wei Kang and Ren An, both of whom looked somber and withdrawn. But with Ren An, I can see beneath his somber facade is the same look he had the day Li Gan was killed, Ren An looked secretly pleased.

I take two steps back “Where is Qu Bing?” Zhao Puo Nu lowered his head and soldiers carried a pallet over. Huo Qu Bing laid on the pallet, unconscious and his face completely white. My legs buckle and I almost collapse but Zhao Puo Nu supports me “The General is still alive.”

.....

I hold Zhao Puo Nu arms and take a deep breath. I force myself to stand “What happened? What danger is he in?”

Zhao Puo Nu gave me two arrows wrapped in cloth “To save Wei Kang, the General went into the Demon Region and we had a hard time finding the enemy because they knew the area so well. The area was narrow and rocky so we couldn’t form attack formations and had to split up. The General was hit by two arrows during the battle, none are in vital places. But.....the arrows are coated with poison.”

I’m so enraged and scared that the two arrows snap in my hands. I toss the ends arrow but save the tips in the cloth. I saw Wei Kang and Ren An flash expressions of joy quickly masked with disappointment. I tell Zhao Puo Nu “Tell everyone to disperse.” Wei Kang asked if I needed anything, and whether we should set off for Chang An to find better doctors. I glare at him and spit out “I just want you to immediately disappear from my sight. Otherwise I might just destroy you first.”

Wei Kang immediately got mad and rushed me, but Zhao Puo Nu pulled me aside while Ren An restrained Wei Kang and dragged him away. Zhao Puo Nu was normally very calm, but his eyes staring at them was also filled with rage.

“Did Ren An and Wei Kang drag out the battle with the outlaws?” Zhao Puo Nu lowered his head “The area was so dangerous and difficult to navigate, I couldn’t tell, so I dare not say anything.”

As the army doctor examined Qu Bing, I knelt down and held his hand, which was fisted tightly and cold. When I pry open his hand, I see written in his palm with blood is the character for “one” (pronounced Yi). It was blurry, like he used every ounce of his strength to write it. Because I was extra sensitive to the pronunciation of this word, I immediately starting thinking elsewhere.

“Bring some water, the General has blood on his hand.” I wash away the bloody word and think. The army doctor sighs and kneels before me “Miss, you must return to Chang An! The two arrows are two different types of poison. I am useless and can do nothing. I can’t even differentiate the two poisons.”

I tearfully ask “Can you guarantee he’ll survive the few days trip to Chang An? That he won’t die of the poison before we arrive?” His lowered his head even more, and my emotions plummeted along with his head. I held on to an icy cold hand and it became my only source of strength to face this. I must be strong. “You can go now!”

I call out “General Zhao!” “I am here!” “Order the most trustworthy person to go to Chang An and find the best doctor and bring him here. Seal the entire city of Xu Fang, letting no one in or out. Do not let any news of this leak out. You do know what the undefeatable warrior god that is the Biao Qi General Huo Qu Bing is in the hearts and minds of the Xiong Nu and the various Xi Yu kingdoms, right?”

I take Qu Bing’s general’s seal and hand it to him “If anyone tries to enter or leave Xu Fang, execute the person!”

Zhao Puo Nu considered it and then kneeled to accept the general’s seal. He was worried and I tell him “If Wei Kang and Ren An want to cause problems, if you execute Ren An, then Wei Kang won’t try anything else. I won’t use this as an excuse to get rid of Wei Kang.” Zhao Puo Nu

was relieved “I understand now.”

“Use the name of the Biao Qi General to ask around all the Xi Yu kingdoms for their best doctors. Just say.....say a woman following the General got food poisoning. But secretly leak news that this woman is the mother of Huo Tan.” “I will!”

“When the Xi Yu doctors arrive, only allow them to enter, do not allow any of them to leave. Split all the army doctors into two groups, always have one group waiting outside for immediate assistance. This is all I can think of for now.”

Zhao Puo Nu got up to leave when I got down on my knees. He was so startled he wanted to help me up, but when he touched my elbow he was shaking and red-faced. “General Zhao, twice you have helped me. This debt of gratitude Jin Yu will forever remember in my heart.”

He rushed outside and said “You needn’t be this way, I will do my best.”

With him gone, it was just Huo Qu Bing and me in the room. My surface courage shatters and I grab Qu Bing’s hand and bite it, but I don’t have the heart to bite down hard. “Qu Bing, if this is some scheme you cooked up with Jiu Ye, I will not speak to you for an entire year..... how can you scare me like this.....” Before I finish talking my tears are falling “No, I just want you to be safe, I won’t hold this against you.....I won’t be mad, as long as you are safe.....”

My tears fall on his palm and soon it forms a small puddle that reflects my own white face, which is filled with anguish and pain.

The current influence of the Han dynasty over the Xi Yu kingdoms is unprecedented. Ten years ago a Han merchant will get picked on when passing through Xi Yu. Even Han ambassadors have been detained before. But now, with one word from Huo Qu Bing, all the Xi Yu kingdoms urgently send their best palace physicians and find the best commoner

doctors.

With Jiu Ye's influence in Xi Yu, news will surely reach him immediately. But the first to arrive isn't Jiu Ye, which confirms even more that the two of them have been plotting this. Because Jiu Ye knows the cover story about me being poisoned is fake, then he doesn't worry and therefore isn't in a rush to arrive. This makes their plot even more bulletproof.

At noon on the second day, a wrinkled and bearded old man who is hunched over arrives, using a crutch to help him move. Behind him are his two disciples carrying boxes. Everyone is wearing wide black robes, so it's impossible to tell their size. The servant bringing them in announce "This is the palace doctor sent from the Yi Nai Kingdom."

I meet the old man's eyes and quickly turn around. I tell the servant "Same rules, when the doctor is treating the patient no one is to enter the room." When the servant leaves, I check to make sure security is tight outside and we are alone before turning around and sitting down next to Qu Bing on the pallet.

Jiu Ye sighed softly and followed me without saying anything.

"What were you two planning? Was that group of outlaws your people in disguise?"

Jiu Ye felt Qu Bing's pulse and his face lost all color and he started to sweat. The longer he felt the pulse, his expression grew more and more alarmed, until in the end his hand was shaking "Yu Er, what happened? How did Huo Qu Bing have two different kinds of poison in his body."

When I saw him, I was starting to feel relieved, but now my heart plummets again. I've been so wracked with worry for a day and a night that right now I'm feeling dizzy "Didn't your people shoot him with the poison arrow? Didn't you two plan all this?"

Jiu Ye removed the bandage on Qu Bing's arm "The poison on the left arm is mine, but the one on the right is from someone else."

"I don't care who shot him with that other poison arrow, I beg you to please cure him." I take out the two arrow tips and show it to Jiu Ye, who puts it to his nose to sniff. He takes out instruments from his servant and tests the poison. After some time he's still investigating the poison, but as time passed I grew more and more afraid. I can't control myself and rudely ask "Aren't you exceptionally talented with medicine? You must be able to cure this poison, right?"

His servant glared at me and indicated for me to be quiet. I realize what I'm doing and quickly say "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to....."

Jiu Ye shook his head "Yu Er, you don't need to say that. The poison on this arrow is called "Seven Day Suffering", because it will take seven days to die once afflicted. The manner of death afterwards is like a person contracting an infectious disease. The poison is created by mixing seven different deadly herbs together. And the antidote requires the exact same seven deadly herbs. But when making it, the seven herbs are added in specific order, and the antidote must be cooked in reverse of that order with the same seven herbs."

Jiu Ye's voice was somber and my heart was chilled "Can you be sure of the order?"

Jiu Ye's eyes were filled with sadness and regret "I can't right now. Most poisons can be cured by finding out the ingredients. The cure for the "Seven Day Suffering" requires that and more, understanding the order it was made, making it very difficult to make an antidote. Because this poison is so vile and deadly, pretty much guaranteeing death, it is against moral law and the formula has been destroyed. I thought this poison had become extinct, who knew it would reappear."

"What will happen if an antidote with the wrong order is consumed?" Jiu Ye was silent and then said "It will speed up the poison and lessen the days left."

I put my face in my hands, full of rage and bitterness. Why? Why did this happen?

“What was the original plan?” Jiu Ye was curing Huo Qu Bing of the poison Jiu Ye prepared and explained “Huo Qu Bing wanted me to help him leave the Palace. He thought long and hard and the only way out was to pretend he died to the entire world. Otherwise the Emperor will never release him. The Emperor values him so much he’s willing to flout Han law and taint his own legacy to let him get away with killing Li Gan. How could the Emperor agree to let him quit his post and leave? Plus those who oppose him in court also won’t let him off that easily. The ties between him and the Wei family will always remain. But the Wei family is now completely dead to him. He didn’t tell you in advance because he knew you would never allow him to take such a risk, even if he believed it was foul proof.”

Jiu Ye pointed to one of his servants “That is Teng Yin. He was a death row convict facing execution in the prison of the Yi Nai Kingdom. I paid his family a lot of money and he has agreed to let me do as I request of him.” Jiu Ye spoke to him and he took off his black robe “Yu Er, look at his body shape and size.”

“It’s quite similar to Qu Bing, and if he was wearing Qu Bing’s clothes and his face isn’t clear, it’s a good match.”

“My poison will cause a person’s skin to turn completely black after he dies and his facial features will rot. The “Seven Day Suffering” also has the same effect.”

“So you two planned this from the very beginning. From when Qu Bing asked to come to Xu Fang, he has been goading and baiting Wei Kang to use Wei Kang’s impetuous personality to push your scheme forward unwittingly. And he will become the best witness to Qu Bing’s “death”.”

I flash back to all the conflicts with Wei Kang recently and I realize what happened “You two were too smart for your own good. A rabbit pushed to the limit will try to leap on an eagle, much less an arrogant Wei

Kang. He unconsciously piggybacked on your plan and created his own assassination attempt.”

I stand up and head out “I’ll get the antidote from Wei Kang.”

“Yu Er!” Jiu Ye stopped me “He will not give it to you. If he did, then he is admitting insubordination and it’s a capital offense. The Emperor is just looking for any opportunity to take out the Wei family and this would be perfect. It can also deepen the rift between Wei Qing and Huo Qu Bing. The Emperor would kill Wei Kang. Since Wei Kang is dead either way, he would rather die than admit the truth. Plus this is a Xi Yu secret poison, he probably doesn’t have any antidote.”

“I don’t believe I can’t torture him enough to get the information.”

“Yu Er, this is an army base, and Wei Kang is still the eldest son of Wei Qing. Half of the soldiers are on his side anyways. If you torture him without any concrete proof, you might cause an insurrection. At which point we don’t have any antidote and we’ll have lost time. We only have six days left as of now.”

My fear, anger, frustration, all boil together and I scream at him “I can’t do this, I can’t do that! So what am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do?.....” My tears are falling and in his eyes I see his sadness for me “Huo Qu Bing, in your heart.....is he.....is he more important than anyone else. Even more important than your own life?”

I turn around to wipe my tears and don’t answer his question.

Jiu Ye says “Yu Er, don’t cry. I promise I’ll return Huo Qu Bing to you. Give me five days to mix the antidote. If after five days I can’t produce the antidote, then whatever you want to do, I will help you.” His voice was unusually calm, so calm it was like a death row inmate calmly walking to his own execution having accepted his fate.

I want to say something but no words come out. He lowered his head and walked outside on his crutch "Inform General Zhao Puo Nu to allow me to enter and exit the army base. Then find me a remote and quiet place where I can mix the antidote. I need absolute concentration to do it. You can't come bother me. I will come to you when I have the results."

He was disguised as an old man and was hunched over, but right now I felt like his hunched back was not faking it, but he was genuinely weighed down by what he needed to do.

My heart hurt and right when I'm about to call out "Jiu Ye", behind me Huo Qu Bing weakly coughed. I quickly turn back around and see that Huo Qu Bing has his brows tightly furrowed as if he's in great pain. I tenderly rub his forehead, and when I turn back, Jiu Ye has left already.

.....

In my life I have never experienced a more painful five days. Every day when the sun set, I felt like the most precious thing in my life was seeping away little by little. When the sun sets on the seventh day, will my life descend into darkness just like the sun?

When I watch a new sun rise, I feel like there is still some hope. I repeat to myself that Qu Bing promised to protect me and the baby for his entire life. Jiu Ye promised me he will cure Qu Bing. Neither of them will not follow through with their promise.

Every time I walk to Jiu Ye's room, I don't dare enter. One time I heard a painful cry from inside the room and right when I'm about to rush in, Jiu Ye's servant Za Za Er stops me. He says nothing, only using silent and dark eyes to warn me to leave.

I cry out "Jiu Ye, what's wrong?" Some time later, a weary voice responds "I am using Teng Yin to test the poison and cannot be distracted. When I have news, I will call for you." I can only turn and leave.

On the night of the fifth night, Za Za Er moves Huo Qu Bing into Jiu Ye's residence but doesn't allow me to enter. I call out from outside "Jiu Ye, Jiu Ye, why don't you let me in? Is the antidote process very painful? No matter what, I want to stay by Qu Bing's side."

After some time, I heard from inside Jiu Ye's voice "Come in!"

Za Za Er moved out of the way and I rushed inside. The moment I walk in I realize the room is pitch black. As I was wondering, suddenly I smell a faint fragrance on my nose. My body collapses on the floor. I never would have expected Jiu Ye to trick me, and when I'm passing out I feel a pair of hands holding me "Jiu Ye, why....."

I don't know how long I've been unconscious, the moment I wake up I keep thinking "why" and I don't even know why I'm asking that question. When I suddenly realize the reason, I sit straight up and shout "why", and I shock Za Za Er with my yelp. He gives me a hate filled baleful glare. I look around and see only a stranger laying next to me. We're laying side-by-side on the pallet, and our hands are placed on top of each other.

I startle and recognize that it's Qu Bing! I lightly hold his hand and I can feel the dark energy has left him. His breathing is calm, indicating the poison has been cured. I'm so happy that I don't even know what to do, I can only stare at Qu Bing.

"Yu Er?" Qu Bing slowly opened his eyes. He looked confused for a moment before reacting "Meng Jiu saved me?" I rush into his arms and my tears start falling. He wipes my tears "The plan got waylaid, I'm sorry." I continue to cry, unable to say anything.

Za Za Er kept coughing and we're reminded that someone else is in the room. I get up "Where is Jiu Ye?"

Za Za Er didn't understand me but got my gist. He had a poker face as he handed Qu Bing a handkerchief. He pointed to Teng Yin laying in the corner. Teng Yin was dressed in the same clothes Qu Bing wore that day,

and his face had already turned black and he was giving off the smell of bodily decay.

Qu Bing opened the letter:

Huo Qu Bing

The fate is done, your wish is complete.

The moving clouds are no more than people aging

The yellow sandy desert, each seeking our own carefree

This parting today, no meeting again in sight

After Qu Bing read it, he silently handed it to me. The last words on the handkerchief indicate the brush was pressed down heavily and the ink soaked through. Jiu Ye left without saying goodbye? No meeting again in sight?

He placed Qu Bing and I side-by-side on the pallet, putting our hands together. Was that his final wish for us?

In my daze, I feel like I can still smell him, but I know that is just my sadness conjuring up these sensations. This time, he really has left, he really has completely given up and left! He will never again appear in my life!

Jin Yu, you should be happy. Only by letting go today can he reach out and capture tomorrow's happiness. Perhaps tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or the day after the day after tomorrow....he will find happiness. Without giving up today, how can one get to tomorrow? Jin Yu, you should be happy.....

.....

The doctors from Chang An can do nothing. Initially they don't believe it's poison, calling it an infectious disease. I angrily kick out all the doctors from the various Xi Yu kingdoms, and Za Za Er and the shrouded Teng Yin leave along with them.

I just stay in a daze beside Huo Qu Bing, whose body is starting to rot. In the army base, the mood is sorrowful and anxious. With the doctors leaving, news will soon travel through Xi Yu, and then onto Xiong Nu, that Biao Qi General Huo Qu Bing is dying. When the news reaches Chang An, how will it affect the world?

"General Zhao, let's return to Chang An! Qu Bing would want to see Chang An, that was where he grew up." No one objected and even Wei Kang was accommodating, everyone rushing back towards Chang An.

At the edge of the world, a red round sun is slowly setting in the West. Before the sun set completely, Huo Qu Bing went to sleep forever, never to awaken. A legendary undefeatable warrior god, he chased the Xiong Nu out of the Desert South region. But right at the peak of his youth, he died at the age of twenty-four, though his name and legend will live on. People will write about his military exploits, and thousands of years later, vestiges of him will still percolate in the He Xi region.

The raging waters from the melted Snow Mountain was rushing through the river like the Milky Way has fallen from the sky and is blanketing the earth. The sound was like millions of horse galloping.

Over a thousand soldiers are kneeled on the ground. Even Ren An and Wei Kang looked genuinely sad. Ren An looked torn and he sighed "The son of the Heavens, a rare talent of an entire generation. A loss for our nation!" He got off his horse and bowed his head on the ground heavily three times, leaving his forehead all bloody.

Zhao Puo Nu saw me holding Huo Qu Bing as if I was a statue. I sat

there the entire night and he made sure no one bothered me and he stayed beside me. A sliver of white was creeping up over the East when he finally decided “Ms. Jin, the General is gone. The weather is hot now and we need to hurry back to Chang An. You....you please.....”

I raise my head and my eyes are swimming with tears. One by one it falls, faster and faster. He’s gone. Yes, he’s gone! No meeting again in sight!

I put down Huo Qu Bing and rush to the river. No one has reacted since they are all kneeled on the ground. When Zhao Puo Nu realizes and reaches for me, I take out a dagger and point it at my chest. I back up while shaking my head, indicating for him not to get close.

Zhao Puo Nu was sobbing and crying “Ms, Jin, please don’t do anything foolish.”

“When you get back to Chang An, bow three times to the Emperor for me and say “Since the child has the Emperor to raise him, then Jin Yu doesn’t need to suffer alone on this earth for ten more years.”

As I finished, I stab the dagger in my chest, and with the blood spurting out, my body falls into the rushing river and in moments I’m gone in the currents. I hear from the shore loud screams “Jin.....Yu.....” reverberating in the sky.

.....

Huo Qu Bing carried a completely soaked me and climbed in the carriage. He took a cloth to dry my hair “Your eyes are red and swollen, clearly you cried your guts out. Thank heavens for the heavy currents, things could not have gone more perfectly. Wei Kang and them will not suspect at all. You needed to cry a bit was enough, what’s with the dramatic acting?”

I lightly touch the intricate dagger, a gift from Yu Dan all those years

ago. By chance it returned to me, almost as if it was meant to help me find my happiness. Yu Dan, I thank you!

“Qu Bing, where are we going?”

“First to Ha Mi to pick up our son, and then we’ll fly as free as the birds. We’ll live as we want. But before that, we need to go find Brother Wolf. He’s getting older, and in a few years some wolves will challenge him. Rather than wait for then, have him resign his position and we can go to Bang Lian Mountains together. The only promise I made in my life was made there. At the Bang Lian Mountains, in front of your Papa’s grave, with Brother Wolf as our witness, I want to marry you and fulfill the promise I made many years ago. Despite being late, but.....”

I laugh and push his hands away “Did you even ask me if I’m willing? Since proposing is a big deal, you’re not even being serious.”

He quickly bowed and asked solemnly “Yu Er, will you marry me?”

I turn my head and smile, refusing to answer him. “Only wishing for one person’s heart, never being apart until our hair is white.” Because of this person beside me, I know I am blessed.

He waited for some time and then asked urgently again. I lightly nod my head and he grabs my hand, his face lighting up into a brilliant smile like the sun.

Outside of the carriage, the land is vast and the sky is unlimited. A red sun is beginning to rise once again.

Epilogue: Shadow of Sorrow

The different orders of mixing the ingredients for the “Seven Day Suffering” is all very hard to differentiate since the results are so similar. Despite it being hard, if there was enough time and he could study Huo Qu Bing’s poison strain and use someone to test the antidote, then he would definitely find the cure,

With seven ingredients, the number of order combinations make five thousand forty different concoctions. Plus if the amounts are varied, then it shoots up to over ten thousand different mixtures. Even if enough test subjects are found to test the poison, but everyone’s body is different and the reaction is different.

With five days, is impossible to find an antidote. Meng Jie bitterly laughed. If it was possible, the “Seven Day Suffering” wouldn’t be deemed a truly hellish poison that was banned in all the Xi Yu kingdoms. His mind flashed the visage of Yu Er crying. He smiled and decided. This will do, this is the only way.

He used his own body to test the poison. Only by feeling it himself could he sense the minute differences and find the antidote. Even if he had to rely on luck as well, it was his only way. Za Za Er and Teng Yin kneeled before him bowing non stop “Shi Nan Tian, if you need to test the poison, please use us instead. Please you cannot test the “Seven Day Suffering” on yourself.”

Meng Jiu calmly said “I have decided. Teng Yin, please prepare and Za Za Er please guard the outside. Don’t let anyone in, especially that girl you saw today.”

Within five days, he tested countless antidotes, so many Teng Yin had lost count. Perhaps Huo Qu Bing’s life wasn’t meant to end now, or perhaps Jiu Ye’s heartfelt wish touched the Heavens, so Meng Jiu hit upon the right antidote. When it happened, he smiled, and Teng Yin felt tears come to his eyes.

All medicine has some poisonous properties, much less poison. The poison plus the antidote, how many did Shi Nan Tian take during the five days? Teng Yin only took a few dozen and still he was in excruciating pain and felt like his insides were being ripped apart. It was worse that the torture he endured in the death row prison. But Shi Nan Tian, this crippled seemingly weak young man, how did he endure it? What kind of soul was hidden in his body?

After taking the antidote, Meng Jiu stood up and took his crutch. He was about to order Za Za Er to get Jin Yu, but then he collapsed on the ground. Teng Yin rushed to help him but Jiu Ye said "I'll do it."

Teng Yin was worried but Za Za Er knew Meng Jiu's personality so pulled Teng Yin aside. Meng Jiu tried many times but he couldn't stand up. His two legs wouldn't listen to him. He lifted his robe and looked at his legs. His one healthy leg was completely black from the knee on down. The other shriveled leg, because the blood circulation was bad, was less black. Meng Jiu lightly pressed on his nerves and investigated. All the color in his face disappeared.

Za Za Er has followed by Meng Jiu's side since he was young, learning medicine from him. He looked at Meng Jiu's leg, and realized what had happened. Shi Nan Tian's nerves in his legs have been completely destroyed by him testing the antidote. The healthy leg was now starting to die and shrivel. Despite Shi Nan Tian being able to control the amount tested perfectly, but in the past five days he simply tested too many poison and antidotes.

The residual poison in his body was pushed into his lower body by the new poison being injected. Now there is likely nothing that can be done to save his legs. He wanted to say something to comfort Shi Nan Tian, but when he opened his mouth, he could only cry.

Meng Jiu was originally crestfallen, but when he heard Za Za Er crying, he gave a small smile. He pointed to a chair, indicating for it to be brought over "In five days, the Heavens let me find the antidote. This is probably the price the Heavens wants in exchange. Have Yu Er bring

General Huo here! But keep her outside, don't let her in."

Za Za Er was enraged. Who was that woman? How much did Shi Nan Tian do for her? How much did he sacrifice for her? Even now, he doesn't want her to know. But he dare not oppose Jiu Ye's orders so he suppressed his rage and sadness and went to get that woman.

Meng Jiu heard Yu Er calling from outside asking to be let in. He knew that he couldn't prevent her much longer. He decided to let her in. But when he's treating Huo Qu Bing, she'll see his sad state and ask what happened to his legs.

He ordered Teng Yin to extinguish the lamps, and when Yu Er walked in, he released a fainting smoke bomb.

It was the dead of night by the time all the poison was cleared from Huo Qu Bing's body. An exhausted Meng Jiu silently stared at Yu Er and Huo Qu Bing sleeping side-by-side on the pallet.

A wind drifted in the window and extinguished the lamp. But it wasn't dark out, the moonlight shone in through the window and happened to land on Yu Er's face, turning her skin as translucent as jade.

So close, so close that he can reach out and touch her.

But so far. So far that she will never know how close they once were, and how far they will be for the rest of this lifetime.

Their first meeting, the girl in the raggedy clothing, the girl who laughed out loud.

Their reunion in Chang An, the thoughtful and cheerful girl who always tried to take care of him.

She admired the moon on the roof, he played the flute in the courtyard.

She visited in the night, but stood outside his window and didn't dare come in.

She learned the flute for him, she placed her entire heart in "The Song of the Yue Person".

From Fall until Spring, from Spring until Winter, she planted the Lover's Vines. She planted her heart, she planted her love for him.

That day, the drops of blood on the flute, her heartbreak, he thought it would be one moment of pain in his life. Who knew it would become a lifetime's pain for him.....

Everything seems like it was just yesterday. When she broke the flute and turned and walked out of his life, it was still stepping on the pain in his heart.....

In front of the Lover's Vine, he cruelly pulled his sleeve out of her hands little by little. Meng Xi Mo, how could you have been so cruel to her back then? How could you have been so cruel to yourself? Why couldn't you let yourself live freely for once?

.....

.....

If the first time he heard her play a song for him, he said "It was lovely."

If he didn't avert his eyes every time she looked at him.

If he didn't pull his sleeve out of her hands.

If he opened his mouth to explain the moment she leaped on the roof.

If every word she said when he was sick and she was holding him was true.....

If.....if.....sadly life has no ifs.

He didn't know how long he stared at her, and only when the room got darker did he snap out of it.

The moon was falling and it was the final bit of darkness before dawn.

A new day is starting, but he will be leaving her life forever.

Huo Qu Bing and she are suited for each other. He can accompany her as she travels the world, ride over thousands of miles, climb the highest mountain, swim the fastest rivers.....

And himself.....

Meng Jiu looked down at his own legs. From now on, he will have to rely on a wheelchair forever.

One handkerchief contains all his longing. He raised the pen and put it down repeatedly. In the end he could not write the characters "Yu Er."

He could not say goodbye to her forever. He can only use "Huo Qu Bing" to start the letter.

The moment Yu Er enters the city of Ha Mi, she will see a doctor's clinic sign with the gold sandy desert as the backdrop and the blue verdant shape of the Yue Ya Spring. She will know immediately where to go to pick up Yi Er.

That day when he chanced to encounter then at the Yue Ya Spring, he was peeved that Huo Qu Bing chose to refer to them as "a married couple",

so he wanted to see Huo Qu Bing's expression when Yu Er saw the sign. But now he regretted it. Now he would rather Yu Er never once think about him.

When he wrote "No meeting again in sight", he had a strange smile on his face. But underneath the smile was a heart that shattered.

Yu Er, this is the last thing I can do for you. With your personality, if you knew my legs were destroyed forever trying to save Huo Qu Bing, you would never be at ease going with Huo Qu Bing to live your carefree existence. I want to see the you who is flying, and not the you who is tied to me because of guilt.

The first rays of the morning light hit the room and shine its golden light on the two people laying on the pallet. Meng Jue smiled, their world belongs in the sunlight.

Meng Jiu picked up Yu Er's hand, and after hesitating for a moment, he bent down and kissed her firmly on the lips.

Yu Er, forgive me, forgive my overstepping my bounds this once.....

Her lips was just like he imagined, sweet, warm, fragrant. But he couldn't have imagined the degree of pain he was feeling, it was pain that seeped into his bones. The tenderness between their lips, the touch of their lips, it was branded on him based on hopelessness.....

After some time, he raised his head. He put her hand on Huo Qu Bing's hand and turned to leave. He wheeled himself out.

No meeting again in sight!

.....and then Jiu Ye began to hum the love song of the plains telling of the love story between Ba Ya Er and Yi Zhu.

.....

The person on the pallet is not yet awake. This time she did not see his figure leaving, and he also did not look back.

He slowly rode alone on his Snow Mountain Camel. Such a camel can fly like the wind, but because of his legs, the camel would have to endure the slow pace from now on.

But right now, he wanted the camel to go slower, even slower, as slow as possible, but the camel still took him further and further away from her.

The blue sky went on for miles, the green grass appeared to connect to the sky, the bright sun was shining down. The white sheep herd, the black horse pack, it was like fallen pearls littering the grassing plains.

A healthy herder was tending to his flock, a beautiful girl was singing a herding song. Her voice rang out in joy, the song of Ba Ya Er and Yi Zhu.

Jiu Ye couldn't help but stop his camel and listen. In this lifetime, happiness was once so close to him, but he missed it.

His heart was like knives cutting it, the pain caused him to start coughing violently. It was some time before he could straighten himself. He tasted an acrid sweetness in his mouth, and when he looked down he saw the snow white camel had a few drops of dark blood on it. It normally should be red blood, but it was tinged with blackness. He glanced at it and then reached out his hand to wipe it off the camel.

The wind of the plains breezed past him, carrying fallen petals in its midst. After it passed, there was only a lonely shadow on the ground that kept him company.

The stunning red beauty of the sunrise had passed and now the sky

was blue tinged with white clouds. His heart came to a realization, and he patted the camel for it to move faster. He took out his flute and played the tune to accompany the herding girl's song.

The rainbow after the rain, the sunrise on the edge of the ocean, the first Spring flowers, most of the beauty in this world can never be owned. It is enough to have experienced beauty.

The clear tune of the flute mixed with the herding girl's song and the sound drifted to the sky. The pain in Meng Jiu's eyes remained, but he had a slight smile.

The emotion was deep, but their fate was shallow. But.....no regrets.....only longing.